

## “DANCING FOR JOY”

By Bill Vamos

Greetings from the Center for Christian Growth! This is Bill Vamos and I am very glad to be talking with you again by means of cassette tape.

The purpose of this cassette is to offer you some kernels of thought and prayer, which can be used in your daily devotions. My theme is Evangelism and Spirituality. This tape will help you to know Christ laying down His life for you. It will also provide some solid and specific guidelines for communicating the Gospel of Christ to others. Please pray with me now. As I am praying, take two or three deep breaths, and relax your body:

Lord of all the hurting and healing people on earth, enable me to come to you now. Lord Jesus, I love You. I praise You. I need You. I want to know You better. You know where my life is shaky. It seems that life is stressful from the alarm in the morning until my head falls exhausted on the pillow at night. O Savior, I need calmness, and strength. But I need something else more, forgiveness and new life. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

In just a few seconds, I'm going to ask you to turn off the tape and have some time for silence and prayer. In your prayers, begin by thanking God. Then confess your wrongdoing and tell God of your guilt feelings. Ask God to forgive you in the name of Jesus, who cried out from the cross; *“God, forgive them for they know not what they do.”*

Say, “In Jesus' name I am forgiven.” Before you temporarily turn off the tape, I invite you to come back and join me once again whenever you are ready. You may want to wait until tomorrow to rejoin me. That would be a good idea. Shut off the cassette now and give the God of unconditional love your prayers of thanksgiving, confession, and being forgiven.

I hope your prayer time was renewing. You may want to come back to the first segment of the tape again, perhaps several times. Thanksgiving, confession, and affirming that you are forgiven are the roots of Christian discipleship. Which brings me to a question: “How did you become a Christian?” I'm not looking for a preconceived answer. I know that some people are converted in an instant while others are transformed during a long journey, sometimes without knowing quite when it happened.

Still others walk the long road and are then met by Christ in a special moment, on a mountain top, or in an unexpected valley.

Let me tell you my story. My mother was a Christian Scientist. My father was a Roman Catholic. You can see that I was born an ecumenical. Yet, my commitment to Christ didn't happen until I was 16 years old. Two years earlier I had been invited to join a Presbyterian Youth Group. Those young people were special. They studied the Bible, held discussions, and prayed together. They conducted several projects of service to others. They had fun. And they included me as a person in my own right, not just an

offspring of my parents. Shy and scared as I was, they loved me into full participation in the group. I changed so much I couldn't believe it.

Why, because those young people had prepared the way for Christ to come, in me. And, in a very special worship service I surrendered myself and my life purpose to Him.

I'm going to ask you to reflect on your beginnings with Christ. But first I'd like you to take a minute or so to relax. First, do some slow deep breathing. Then, tighten and loosen your muscles, starting at the top of your body and moving down. While you're doing that, I'm going to pray. Go ahead and relax, and listen to this prayer which is for you:

O Lord, give this precious servant of yours the wondrous gift of slowing down. Let his speed be reduced. Let her twisted nerve endings unwind and let her start to rest in You. As he tightens and loosens his muscles, may he become calm. As she breathes in air and exhales, may he also breathe in God and breathe out resistance to God. Dear Lord, let this special person of yours become quiet and know what it is to be still a and know that You are God. Amen.

If you need more time to slow yourself down, turn off the tape, and whenever you are ready, come back.

Having started to decrease your pace continue to be still with God, and meditate and pray over your own beginnings with Christ, especially if you are still struggling with whether or not to commit yourself to Him. Then, thank Him for your story and all who are involved in it. Turn off the tape again, thankfully ponder and pray in response to Christ. Come back when you are ready.

However you may tell the story of your spiritual journey, you can be certain that Christ is with you now. What is He doing? He is giving you life, vibrant, compassionate, joyful, and eternal life. He is turning you toward others and what they need in order to really live. And the ironic paradox of Christ's life-giving strategy is that we live in a new and authentic way because he died.

Listen to this passage of Scripture, read by Joyce Fall. Joyce says: "I'm reading from the Gospel of John, the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 7 through 11:" *So Jesus said again, "I am telling you the truth; I am the gate for the sheep. All others who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever comes in by me will be saved; he will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only in order to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come in order that you might have life—life in all its fullness. I am the good shepherd, who is willing to die for the sheep."*

BILL RESUMES

There is another passage which reflects these words of Jesus. In his Letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes: *“...it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)*

As I read this passage I think back again to my early days as a Christian. When I first surrendered myself to Christ, I could hardly wait to tell other people about Him and what He meant to me. There was a holy fire burning within me, and I knew that fire was there in order to warm other lives. For the first five years, the flame of Christ glowed within me and I sought to shed its brightness on the needs of others. But here came a point when the fire started burning down, until it became little more than a heap of ashes.

Ever since then my need has been to renew my relationship with Christ in prayer and in the Christian community. Over and over I need to pray, “Lord I know that you died, You did it for the whole world, and that Your cross calls me to especially minister to the poor, the needy and the oppressed. But, I also need to be reminded, Good Shepherd, that you laid down Your life for me.”

How about you, do you need that reminder? Has your road of life become an alley, filled with discarded dreams and wall to wall discouragement? Can you offer your inner trash, if only a little at a time to the Savior who knows what it is to walk through the garbage of life? Can you come to Him again with your whole self? Say to Him, “Lord Jesus, I open myself to You.”

Are you worried about another person, or persons, in your life? Can you look into the eyes of Jesus and see that He actually cares for your loved one more than you do? Say to Him, “Lord, I surrender my life to You as though it were for the first time, and I surrender my friend to You, as well.”

Have you recently said: “Lord, I want to help you heal your traumatized, pain-ridden world, but there are too many wounds to cleanse, too many infections to overcome. I feel overwhelmed.” Can you say to Jesus, “Lord, You turned your own crucifixion into a victory! You battled evil and death, and You won. If you can do that when we killed You, You, God’s only Son, surely You can empower me to help You mend our heartbroken world.” Menacing as our world is today, Your love is stronger than anything we, in our cynicism and indifference, may do to each other. Lord, I give my life to You.”

Take some time now, to renew your commitment to Christ. Perhaps you will find it helpful to pass the words of a familiar hymn through your mind, or even to sing it, right there in your solitude. You may well have a favorite song, or more than one, but let me suggest “Amazing Grace”, which is what comes to mind for me. Be still before God again. Relax and slow down. Then, sing to God and to yourself, and pray a prayer of commitment, surrendering your thoughts, your attitudes and your heart to Lord Jesus. Shut off the tape now, and come back when you are ready.

The Bible shows us a God who moves lovingly over every individual on earth. There is a passage of Scripture in Luke 15 that stirs up the holy fire in me. In Luke 15:7 Jesus says, *“There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine respectable people who do not need to repent.”* And later in this chapter those words are echoed. In verse 10 Jesus says: *“I tell you the angels of God rejoice over one sinner who repents.”*

Can you feel the spine-tingling excitement in these Scripture verses? One person, a sinner yet, gets a standing ovation from the angels of God, when she turns to Christ and commits her life. Prior to this momentous event you can sense that God has poured out everything, day after day wooing the sinner, until finally she repents, and then Heaven explodes with celebration.

Then can you realize that such total, loving pursuit follows every person in the world during every single moment.

The focus in this passage is on the outcast and the under-privileged, but somehow everyone is included. Just as soon as one sinner turns away from egotism and turns toward Christ and accepts Him, all of Heaven lights up and the angels of God dance for joy.

Once again, we are included. At one time or another, Heaven held a party to celebrate our commitment. Perhaps it is poised to celebrate right now, or very soon. And Christ Jesus is yearning to use our lives as channels through whom He can reach other people. I invite you now to ask God to lead you to a person with whom you can share your faith in Christ.

You say that your faith in Him is too meager to be shared? Remember that our Savior once fed 5000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread after which He said, *“I am the Bread of Life.”* (John 5:35) “But,” you say, I wouldn’t know what to say or when to say it.” Recall that Jesus said to His disciples: *“It is not you who will speak, but the Spirit of God speaking through you.”* God guides our language when we speak for Christ. And He alerts our ears and our heart’s as we listen. But maybe you’re still reluctant. Your protest may sound like this: “How will my words make any real difference to someone else, even if they are from God?” Go back to the Scripture I suggested in the last segment, Acts 1:8: *“You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will bear witness to Me in Jerusalem and all over Judea and Samaria and away to the ends of the earth.”*

That passage really answers all our questions. It’s inspiring. It’s encouraging. When I hear that verse, I want to dance for joy.

Take a few moments commune with God in prayer. Ask the Lord to guide you to one person with whom you can communicate the Gospel of Christ. God’s answer may come at some later time, even in the midst of a conversation. Just keep asking to be led, and in

God's own good time, God will direct you. Stop the tape now and be present to Almighty God.

Christian witness is truly dancing for joy. You may be asking: "How does one do that? I believe that we need to take three steps: Pray! Love! Dance!

The first step is to pray. Through a disciplined life of prayer we can actually become people who are filled with the Spirit of God. Sometimes, all we have to offer the Lord is an empty cup, or a cup that is broken. No matter, God pours love into us anyway, and when that happens, we overflow, one way or another. And God guides us to sit down at the table of life in the places God has prepared for us, and with the people God wants our lives to touch.

The Apostle Paul records one of his prayers in Ephesians 3:14-21 (G.N.B.) Listen as Joyce reads.

*For this reason I fall on my knees before the father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth receives its true name. I ask God from the wealth of his glory to give you power through his Spirit to be strong in your inner selves, and I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts through faith. I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, so that you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep, is Christ's love—although it can never be fully known—and so be completely filled with the very nature of God. To him who by means of his power working in us is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for, or even think of: to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus for all time, forever and ever! Amen.*

Take some time to pray with Paul. Let Ephesians 3:14-21 become your prayer, for yourself and for others. And come back to the cassette when you are ready.

In verse 17 of Ephesians 3, Paul writes: "*I pray that Christ will make His home in your hearts through faith.*" When you pray with a Savior who has already "Moved in" to your life, you are free to be honest with Him. After all, Christ is at home in you. He is "family" to you. You can let your hair down with Him.

I'm going to share with you one of my honest prayers and then I'm going to invite you to pray one of your own.

Lord, the road between myself and You is hard for me to travel right now. It feels more like a roller coaster than a bridge. I don't want to be impertinent, Dear God, but could you have done a better job of creating the pathway between You and me? I mean, why can't it all be even and smooth and flat, no ups and downs in other words. I'm down today because no one has yet really recognized how truly gifted and smart I am. I know that "The last shall be first, but if that's true, why don't the last get to walk at the front of the line?" And furthermore, I'm discouraged because spiritual growth in the church doesn't move fast enough. I

know you're doing a lot to quicken the spirits of Your people these days, but couldn't You do more? I see lots of people moving forward with You, but how about some giant steps! And one more thing, God, why don't my faults and weaknesses and downright sins remain defeated once I have turned them over to You? The self I don't like keeps coming back to visit me, like an unwanted guest, and he comes every day. Why don't you do something about that? On the other hand, there are ups in my life: communion with You is always available. Your mysterious, unpredictable presence keeps emerging, just when I think I've lost You for good. My loved ones and friends are there for me, not always, but most of the time. I have a good job. You keep challenging me to minister to the needy, and when I do, I experience what it is to really love. And you even make me laugh. That's my honest prayer, God. Thank You for the ups. Enable me to cope with the downs, and transform them into steps that lead to You. I praise You. I love You. In the name of Jesus. Amen

I encourage you to write your own honest prayer or to pray it silently, or to say it out loud. Remember that Jesus shares your life with you. He is at home within you. You are free to be open with Him. Come back to the tape when you are ready.

In verse 18 of Ephesians, chapter 3, Paul prays that *"...you, together with all God's people, may have the power to understand how broad and long, how high and deep is Christ's love."* In a moment, I'm going to ask you to pray to have your eyes opened, so you can see yourself and others as persons for whom Christ died.

Sometimes I ask myself: "Who am I when I witness to Christ? An expert? A seeker after success? A perfect example? No! I am one of those people for whom Jesus prayed: *"God, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

Day by day, pray that you may see yourself as a person for whom Christ died. And pray also for God to enable you to see others in the same way, especially people who are pieces of sandpaper in your life.

A woman had a neighbor who had told her he was not a Christian and never would be. Every morning, as the woman looked out her study window, she said, "There goes a man without God." But she kept praying for him. As she turned her attention toward God, and lifted her neighbor to the Lord in prayer, her attitude toward the neighbor changed. She started saying, as she watch him leave for work, "Christ laid down His life for that man."

Pray now that Christ will come within the attitudes you have toward people. First, remember to settle into your prayer time. Inhale deeply and then, slowly breathe out. Take your time. Tighten and loosen your muscles. Be gentle with yourself. Then, ask God to open your eyes, so you can see yourself and others as persons for whom Christ died. When you are ready, come back to the cassette.

When we commune with God, we are preparing for the movement of God's Spirit, in ourselves and in other people. Prayer gets us ready to dance for joy. Prayer is the first step.

The second step is love. All of the Christ-centered preaching and talking in the world is a cacophony of noise if the people to whom we witness do not receive love from us. Jesus, the Son of God, was the most dynamic person who ever lived not because He was a stem-winding preacher, a profound scholar or a smooth talker. He had unparalleled charisma because He was God in human flesh, yeah. But He also radiated authenticity to people because nothing anybody ever did to Him could stop Him from loving, even when He saw, ahead of Himself a dead body and a solid rock tomb. Oh, you could try to turn off His tenderness and compassion. You could try to escape Him. But you couldn't stop Him from caring. Nobody could do it. Nobody ever will.

When we seek to be effective dancers for joy, we need to recall that question that divides the church. Should the church save souls or change society? I want to suggest and answer. Do both and do them with the love of Christ.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' call to save souls is dynamic and winsome. Matthew 28:16-20 records these words... (Joyce reads)

*The eleven disciples went to the hill in Galilee where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him, even though some of them doubted. Jesus drew near and said to them. "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age."*

That's the finale to the Gospel according to Matthew. We are certainly called to save souls. And we are also summoned to change society. Our world is dominated by greed and violence and impulsiveness, and the Christian Gospel says that by the grace and power of Christ, we are to change that. Jesus' disciples are to envision a new world, a world of caring and justice and peace. We are to see our present world in the light of the Kingdom of God and live as though that Kingdom has already come. Matthew can also help us hear. Listen to Joyce as she reads from Matthew 25:31-40:

*"When the Son of Man comes as King and all the angels with him, he will sit on his royal throne, and the people of all the nations will be gathered before him. Then he will divide them into two groups, just as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the righteous people at his right and the others at his left. Then the King will say to the people on his right, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father! Come and possess the kingdom which has been prepared for you ever since the creation of the world. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me in your homes, naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you took care of me, in prison and you visited me.' The righteous will then answer him, 'When Lord, did we ever see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? When did we ever*

*see you a stranger and welcome you in our homes, or naked and clothe you? When did we ever see you sick or in prison, and visit you? The King will reply, 'I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it for me!'*

Isn't it exciting that our discipleship is not one-sided, but instead is inclusive. We are to save souls and society. The two actually belong together. Our opportunities to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick may not always be accompanied by an opening for Christian witness, but any time we give caring to other people, we plant the seeds of new commitment to Christ. And surely, when other persons are won to Christ, the compassionate Savior and Lord, they will be new recruits in forging a renewed society.

Whether we are communicating our faith in Christ to an individual person or engaged in overcoming injustice, and working for world peace, love is what is most needed, the love of Christ who has made His home in us.

I'm going to suggest that you enter into some moments of prayer now. As you do, try singing, to God and yourself, the hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling", or some other hymn which you prefer, and when you are finished, be present to God, and pray.

The people to whom we witness and the world we seek to change are both crying out to be loved. No individual person wants to be treated like a spiritual scalp that you will hang in your trophy case. No evil structure in this world will give way to spiritual pride. We stand alongside the needy, whatever the need may be, and carry out the action of love. Once again, the Apostle Paul moves our hearts to the kind of loving that is needed both by the earth and her inhabitants. Joyce will read for I Corinthians 13:1-13:

*I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains—but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned—but if I have no love, this does me no good. Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud, love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail. Love is eternal. There are inspired messages, but they are temporary; there are gifts of speaking in strange tongues, but they will cease; there is knowledge, but it will pass. For our gifts of knowledge and of inspired messages are only partial; but when what is perfect comes, then what is partial will disappear. When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am a man, I have no more use for childish ways. What we see now is like a dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete—as complete as God's knowledge of me. Meanwhile these three remain; faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love.*



It's difficult to say anything after hearing those words. I do ask you to meditate on their meaning for you. And pray over the ways in which God wants you to love people, and to love the world. Come back to the cassette whenever you are ready.

There are three steps in Dancing for Joy. First – Pray; Second – Love; and Third – Dance

When you communicate the Gospel of Christ to someone else it's like dancing into another person's life. Christian witness is not pushing religion at a person. It's not shouting or screaming the Gospel. It's not marching up to a person and saying: "Well, are you a Christian or not?" And it's not clutching Christ to yourself and saying: "I'm going to share my Savior with you, but you can only have a little bit of Him." No, to bear witness to Christ is to dance. I'd like to use the word "dance" as an acronym for what happens in effective Christian witness:

D – is for Dialogue. Dialogue is like dancing. When we dance, the first thing we do is get in touch with each other. We get acquainted and then, we start taking steps together, getting used to the other person's unique ways of responding to music.

That kind of rhythmic dialogue is the way that persons open their lives to the music of God's Spirit guiding them. Hear the other person's thoughts and feelings. Just listen to whatever she wants to say. Don't get ahead of her or fall behind. Be quiet and try to keep in step with her. Even if some of her words twist your feelings, stay in touch with what she is telling you. Ask questions. Then, share some of your story. Make it personal. Include your disappointments, your hopes, and your dreams. D is for dialogue.

A – is for Accept. Accept your friend with no strings attached no stereotypes, no expectations. Dancing for joy is letting the other person dance in whatever way is his current style, even if that occasionally involves stepping on your feet.

It is so rare to be loved without restrictions that when you accept someone else, Christ, takes a step into the relationship even if He isn't mentioned. That certainly is true in my life. Those kids in the Church Youth Group, when I was a teen-ager, put up with my clammy handshakes and my soft, embarrassed voice, and my reluctance to accept any responsibility and they danced with me. And I simply couldn't figure out how they did it, unless they had something special. A is for Accept.

N – is for Nudge. Nudge the spirit of the other person by telling the Gospel story. We cannot cause another person to make a commitment to Christ. But we can say some things that will open the way. The One who converts other people is the Living God. But we can nudge others to be alert to the sounds of God's grace as they come in the Gospel of Christ.

Don't be ashamed to tell the story of Christ's forgiving love and how that love is offered to each person, to become life's purpose and strength. Let it flow. Keep on dancing, continuing the rhythm of dialogue. Gently nudge the other person, being clear about the steps which God has already taken through God's only Son.

Suggest Bible passages through which the other person may be drawn to Christ. I am leaning to carry a small wooden cross in my pocket which I can make available to the person with whom I am witnessing. It becomes a reminder of Jesus' outpouring love and His interest in each individual person. N is for Nudge.

C – is for Concentrate. That's an important word for dancing. You can't be pre-occupied, or let your attention wander. So it is when you communicate the Good News of the Savior. Refrain from looking to see what time it is, or fold your arms in front of you or glancing hither and yon as you listen and talk. Lean a little bit toward the person and maintain good eye contact. You may think of other practical ways to help focus your attention on someone else, and thus give her your respect. C is for Concentrate.

E – is for Empathize. When the person with whom you are sharing Christ speaks of his struggles, participate in his feelings and thoughts. Just as a dancer is responsive to the gestures of his partner, let yourself take part in the other person's expressions of inner need. And go one more step. Give active support. E is for empathize.

When you witness to Christ, spend enough time with the person to be able  
To Dialogue,  
To Accept,  
To Nudge,  
To Concentrate, and  
To Empathize

Let yourself have a time of prayer now and reflect how you can best communicate Christ's Gospel. Ask the Lord to prepare you for your special opportunity to witness. Ask Jesus to lead you as you dance for joy. In your praying recall Jesus' words in Matthew 28:19 – "Go to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples..." Turn off the tape now and, when you are ready, come back once again.

As we come to the end of this cassette, listen to these words from the First letter of John, the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 9, 10, 19 (G.N.B.)

Joyce read:

*God showed his love for us by sending his only Son into the world, so that we might have life through him. This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven. We love because God first loved us.*

I pray that God's love in Christ may grow in you and in the people who are touched by your life.

These are the Scriptures that we have used in this cassette tape.

John 10:7-11  
Galatians 2:20  
Acts 1:8  
John 5:35  
Ephesians 3:14-21  
Matthew 28:16-20  
Matthew 25:31-40  
I Corinthians 13:1-13  
I John 4:9, 10, 19