

"Spiritual Formation - Discipleship"

Dallas Willard at Bethel - 10/09/2008

Scribe's Comments - The session was transcribed from the recording in good-faith effort but it is not verbatim. The **bold** and underline offer the scribe's emphasis and the [brackets] offer further explanation.



Session 1 - "[The Disappearance of Moral Knowledge](#)" (audio)

[1:07:00] [Bethel 2]

This is in an academic setting. I'm going to come half way between preaching & teaching.

The Background - Two talks tonight & tomorrow night.

[Talk 2 of 2 - "[Spiritual Formation: Obedience](#)" Bethel 3]

[Bethel Pastors - "[Disappearance of Moral Knowledge in the Church](#)"]

[Links to more Willard, "[Disappearance of Moral Knowledge](#)" talks]

A situation in our culture that is not very well understood - I call that **The disappearance of moral knowledge**. The teaching institutions of our society, primarily our schools and churches, no longer provide a body of knowledge of good & evil, right & wrong. Good & evil, right and wrong are so much a part of our lives. There are lots of feelings, moral outrage, moral anger, some moral traditions. Moral knowledge is no longer recognized and taught as such in our institutions. You may disagree and that's okay. Many people in the University system don't fully understand what's happened. The continue to act as somehow we no the difference.

When it comes to the content of teaching, you could never grade someone for an answer on a moral question you put on a test.

* Grade a student who says it is wrong to lie.

You can not grade them right or wrong on that answer.

Teaching of good & evil, right and wrong have disappeared from the fields of knowledge that guide our lives. When you think about it, there is hardly anything that can be more disastrous than that because our lives our guided by our perceptions, at least our feelings are guided by who is right and wrong, who is good and bad. By and large, we are guided in our understanding of these matters by the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially in what we call the Western world, there really isn't anything alternative that stands out to his teaching on justice, love, mercy, truthfulness, honesty. No one else stands out as a teacher in that regard. But, He is classified not as someone who has knowledge but someone who is religious. That's a part of the whole story because religion itself is even more eliminated from the

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fields of knowledge as that is recognized today. We have quite a problem before us. I want to say some things that might begin to lead us on our way back.

Moral Theories/Understanding

When we think about **moral guidance**, we think about 4 different points:

1.) What is goodness & rightness?

Jesus and his people have always taught love is what constitutes moral goodness. If you stir the pot of academic thinking and popular discourse, you're going to come up with something pretty close to that. What is love? What is right? What is good? It is the loving thing. Moral rules are justified in terms of how they relate to loving other people. That's a simple teaching of the New Testament.

Paul in **I Corinthians 13** - if we love others as we love ourselves, we will naturally do what the law says. The love ways what follows from love or care for one another.

2.) Who is loving?

Who stands as a model of loving in our world? Jesus is the one who stands as the model of love. His sacrifice on the Cross is simply the apex of a life of devotion and care for others. That's an illustration of who is loving.

3.) How do you know what is good, who is right?

Perhaps the greatest problem for our culture today is how do you know. Knowledge has to be tested against the field of life. Love can be tested in that field. It can be shown by all measures as the preferable way to live, the kind of person to be. But that doesn't come to us first of all by experience because experience is pretty rough. We have to have someone who would instruct us and teach us about love. Out of biblical tradition comes the teaching that "God is love." That ultimate reality is love. If we want to be in harmony with ultimate reality and well as approximate reality, namely the person next to you, your neighbor, then love is the way to do that.

How do you know what is good & right, what is love comes down from our traditions that come down from scriptures and Jesus Himself. That's the teaching we can follow so we we can know the goodness and rightness in our own live.

4.) How do you become a loving person?

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A person who is prepared to do what is right and disregard the cost?

There is nothing that comes close to answering that question like discipleship to Jesus Christ. Jesus becomes the center of the issue.

We have a culture that is fundamentally organized around His principles and His image and thoughts that comes from Him. Yet we have a reaction that says this is not knowledge. You are left to struggle with your battles in life and with your confusions, and enemies and friends, and all kinds of circumstances that come to you without guidance as to what is good and what is right.

Some traditions do better than others. We would think that the church itself would be best at leading the way and I think that is right.

We must talk about what has happened that has left the Church not the guide to society?

So that it too no longer is able to give clear and forceful guidance as it what is good, and what is bad, and what is right, and what is wrong.

The Topic for this evening

"Holiness Established in the Kingdom of God" [9:40]

Answers the question how the gospel of the Kingdom of God sustains the moral life and provides understanding of good & evil.

This evening addressing the issue of spiritual renewal through knowledge of Christ and His Kingdom and thereby of good and of evil.

We have to admit a problem at the outset — Currently, Christian people generally do not think of themselves as people who obey Christ. Obeying Christ is not a part of our religion. Believing in Christ is a part of our religion but that has to be separate off from obedience to Christ.

[Addressed in his next talk - "[Spiritual Formation: Obedience](#)" Bethel 3/5]

Luke 6:47-48, *"I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my word and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When the flood came, the torrent struck the house but could not shake it because the house was well built."*

[[Read verse 47 then commented below](#)]

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We're talking about hearing and doing. It's very important not to get guilty as we discuss this. We need to keep our minds clear. If we get in to guilt, we'll stop thinking and start cringing.

[\[Read verse 48\]](#)

If you build your house on dirt or sand, when the flood comes or trouble comes in life, the house will not stand. We want to try to understand what that means. What is it like to put your life together in such a way that no matter what happens, it is well with you? To build your house in such a way that doing the things that Jesus taught just comes routinely and easily from you.

If you think about that description for a moment, you'll see that's not how we normally think about the teachings of Jesus. We normally think of them hard or impossible. Many of our most well known teachers will tell you the teachings of Jesus are simply ideals. Some will say that that they are so high, that their only function is that they will beat you into submission that you will crawl to the cross for forgiveness. That's an important way of thinking that accounts for the lack of manifest Christlike character in our churches and society. We think of them as impossible ideals, the only function of which is to convince us that we are failures instead of being instructions about how to live that will bring us to peace and harmony with God and into a life that flows with righteousness and with power.

I have given you other verses and I am a little afraid they will get you into guilt. I don't want you into that tonight. You'll have plenty of time to get into that later.

James

[15:10]

The one who looks at the perfect law of liberty and doesn't forget what he saw. The law of liberty is the law of love, the law that Jesus taught. It is the law that says you are free from condemnation by trusting in me.

The interesting thing is...

What you really think about Jesus is what you do after you learn you don't have to do anything.

[15:37]

Where do you go from there?

That shows what you really think about Jesus?

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If you think Jesus was the divine Son of God, and you draw all the inference that come from that, you'll want to do what He said and become His disciple. James says the one who looks into the law of liberty, will not forget it and be blessed in what you do. If you want the good life, learn how to do what Jesus said. That's the house that is built upon the rock so whatever comes will not disturb it.

I John 2:4 - The one who's says, "I have come to know God and does not keep His commandments..."

Oh, I can't read the rest of that. That's too hard. We need to think about that and think about that deeply.

Luke 6:40 - *"A pupil is not above his teacher but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher."*

That's the point of teaching - to make the student like the teacher.

"Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and not do the things that I say?"

I dragged you through that to ask you, do you believe that it was the intention of Jesus to actually do the things that He said and that would not be a bad thing but a good thing, and there is a way anyone can do that?

Anything Jesus said anyone can do.

That brings us into an understanding of good & bad, right & wrong that is intensely practical.

That was the aim of the ancient moralists and well up into the modern period - to provide a way that people could actually come to do what is right - that's the big project. That's what requires discipleship and not just believer-ship. "I believe but I don't do it." That's the contrast.

Gospels Preached Today

[19:35]

The gospels heard today that do not have much produce disciples. Much of our teaching of the Christian gospel does not lead to that.

would these gospels that would lead to discipleship and routine, easy obedience to Christ the transformation of character. That's what spiritual formation is, the transformation of character.

1.) Forgiveness - You're in real trouble. Your punishment was taken by Christ on the Cross. If you believe that, after you die, you'll end up in Heaven. For many people, that's the gospel. That's important. We now know if you present it in just that way, it does not lead to discipleship. That's how we come to have a version of Christianity that does not involve discipleship. It does not

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involve people learning from Jesus how to be like Him. A disciple is someone staring close to Him learning to be like Him.

2.) Liberation - Gospel of the Left, both theologically and politically. The gospel is that God is in favor of liberation and you can be to. You can stand with God in the project of liberation. This version does not say much about forgiveness of sins. Unfortunately the forgiveness of sins version doesn't say much about the liberation. Is liberation important? Yes it is. Jesus carried to its climax the great prophetic profession that stood against oppression. That's what got Him killed because He "spoke truth to power" as we say. He was carrying through with the criticism of the oppressive forces of His day. Unfortunately that gospel does not produce disciples. Sometimes it produces a redefinition of the word disciple.

I will say again, a **Disciple** is someone who is with Him learning to be like him...to do without thinking, just be doing the things that He said. Not let your left hand know what the right hand is doing. You can't do that without trying. What Jesus was talking about is becoming the kind of person who without thinking does the right thing.

3.) Church - You take care of your church and your church will take care of you. More common than you might think. That's why service to the church takes place of personal transformation and easy obedience to Christ.

People ask, "Why are involved with church?"

If you're a Christian you want to love your enemies and you'll find a few of that at church. The church is designed to learn how to love each other.

A church fight is the time not to leave but to say this is a great time for me to learn how to grow. I am going to learn how to love her or him. All will know you are my disciples because of the love you have for one another.

Remember who Jesus had with him and how they fought with one another? Always arguing who is going to be Secretary of State when Jesus took over the government. The church is a place where we learn to love as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus

Life in the Kingdom of God now is available to all who turn their existence over to Him.

[27:20]

Give your life to God. That really does mean "your life". It don'ts mean just your eternal soul or destiny. The Kingdom of God is God's rule on your life now, right where you are...in a classroom, committee meeting, working on a book, planning a course that will be taught next semester...

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"Repent" - Re-think how you are thinking about your life.

You may think of your life as something you're in charge of. If you are in charge, you get all the worries, and all the anxieties. You have a kingdom, a queendom, a persondom. Your kingdom is the range of your effective will.

* Going through your purse - I would have invaded her queendom. Your kingdom, your queendom is what you have say over.

God's kingdom is what He has say over. His effective rule. He invites us to bring our little kingdom into His Kingdom. That's Jesus' gospel. Now then, that opens the door into discipleship and transformation. The Kingdom of the Heavens is the manifest presence of God, God's reigning. Where what God wants done, is done. He allows for parts of human life not to be like that.

That's why we pray, *"Thy Kingdom come"*. There are many places where what He wants done is not being done. We can open our lives and bring that kingdom into our lives. When I pray, *"Thy Kingdom come"*, I'm not praying about the nations of the world, I'm praying primarily about myself. Let your rule come into every part of my life.

Romans 14:17 - *"The Kingdom of God is not meat and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*

He was addressing a church fight. A degree of righteousness, peace and joy that is humanly unexplainable. It is meant to include all of human life. When we bring our kingdom to Christ and His kingdom, then we are able to receive God's power and righteousness in everything we do. "Whatever you do in word or deed do all in the name of Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God..."

We do it in his name on his behalf with His resources. That's what we are learning as His disciples.

For example...

"Turn the other cheek."

[32:45]

What are we doing when we turn the other? What are you doing when you remain vulnerable to someone who has hurt you?

You are giving place to God's action in that circumstance.

If you are like most people, you say, *"I don't know if I want to do that."*

You have a choice of trying to handle it in a human way. In the human way we know what it is, if someone strikes me and I strike back and they know what to do. But if they strike me and I don't strike back, they have a

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problem. They now have to work through something which they would not have had to work through if I had simply hit them in return.

We make room for the action of God and we are learning how to live in the Kingdom of God. The work from above simply transfers us into the Kingdom of God and then we learn how to live in the Kingdom.

Holiness comes for one who stands in the Kingdom of God and learns how to live there.

[Regeneration] - The birth from above is not the end, it is the beginning. Now we come, we have received a life from the Kingdom above. It is not "new" birth, it is the "birth from above." "Above" refers to the Kingdom of God also called the "Kingdom of the Heavens"

When the life of God moves in us we are drawn to learn its ways in every aspect of our lives. That's where we begin experience the "goodness of rightness". If you don't experience the goodness of rightness, rightness is a real drag.

- * I ask my students in Ethics class:
Do you think morality is a good thing?
Is it necessary? Sometimes we say, "a necessary evil."

When the life of God moves in us through the new birth, we are drawn to learn its ways in every aspect of our lives.

That's what the disciple, the apprentice, the student is learning - they are learning to live their life as Jesus would live that life it was His.

1st - Learning to do what Jesus said

[37:15]

Look at His commandments. "*Thou shall not kill.*"

That's not far enough. Would you have rather killed? Would you have like to have killed but you didn't have the opportunity. If so, you still have a problem, so we are dealing with anger.

How many murders would not happen if people were not angry? A few but not many. Most murders occur from anger usually mingled with contempt.

Jesus is teaching to deal with the anger, deal with the contempt. Don't repress it, don't deny it. Learn how to be with out it. That turns us in to deep

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teaching about the motivations of the heart and the structure of character. How can we actually care for people in such a way that murder never becomes an issue?

"Lust & Adultery"

I want to talk about this a good deal more tomorrow evening.

He goes right to the heart again. The issue is not, "Did you or didn't you?" but, "What would you have liked?" To what length did you go to stir up the kinds of desires that lead to adultery and if they don't, lead to a degraded life for you and others even without it?

Those are things we work through learning how to live the kind of life that naturally has that the expression of good and right as Jesus would give it.

2nd - Learn how to Handle Ordinary events in daily life [39:45]

Many things in our lives He never said anything about.

* Ordinary - Automobiles, electricity, things he had nothing to say about.

There He must also be our teacher. God's kingdom in...

* Running a business, a committee meeting, a church, we are learning how to do that if Jesus were leading our lives.

3rd - Learn to how to Act in God's Power. [40:45]

Only then we can cease to use our power to get things to go the way how we want things to go. Jesus gave a lot of teaching about prayer.

Prayer is God's "power sharing device".

Why a universe in which there is prayer? That is how God develops His people and allows them to have more and more of His power still under His control as their Kingdom grows in His Kingdom.

Prayer & Giving - two steps of entry into the Kingdom of God.

Through them you learn more and more about the kingdom and increasingly that's where you take all of your life as His disciple. Today this is not taught because it is not a part of the gospel that is commonly heard.

That's why it is so important when we come to think about "**Holiness**" - (that old fashioned word has a bit like no other words does)

We learn about Holiness by living in the Kingdom of God.

Today it is assumed you can be a Christian all your life and never become a disciple.

Salvation - Evangelical circles think of salvation as entirely a matter of having your sins forgiven. When that is done, what else is there to do?

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** Sit by the highway of life with your hood up waiting for the heavenly AAA to come and haul you out.*

Discipleship & Death

[43:15]

The Gospel that Jesus brings us is where we step into a life of continual growth in goodness, rightness and power and we know more and more of the Kingdom of God and who we are and what we are doing so that we are caught up in the Kingdom of God in such a way that when death comes, we don't even know it.

*"Those who keep my word will never see (experience) death." John 8
"He destroyed death." 2 Timothy 1:10*

How could that be? Let me suggest it comes to those whose lives are so caught up in the Kingdom of God, as the body ceases to function they are focused entirely on what's going on around them. Those who come to meet them, Jesus Christ in His glory, God and the environments of heaven that they don't know they are dying because they are not.

One of the disheartening things about many folks in our churches is they don't know what I'm talking about right now. They continue to think of death as this awful thing that is going to happen to them or someone else. It looks pretty bad for those who are still there.

What Jesus is talking about is entering the Kingdom of God in such a way that the transition from this life to the next one will simply be one of joyous reunion, continuity of consciousness. That is one of the things a disciple learns. That's why their world has totally changed. Their lose their fear of death because they now understand what life is. I'm sure after a while they begin to look around and figure out that something happened. Perhaps they are with people they know have already gone on. It isn't like they will never know but still it is important to understand the continuity of life in the Kingdom of God.

Now if we don't accept this teaching about discipleship as the heart and message of the person of Christ, then the moral substance drains out of our lives. We have nothing to support the good we know to do. We are apt to lead our lives frustrated and disappointed and maybe angry, and never know the peace and love and joy that is meant to fill our lives as disciples of Him.

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Love: The Heart of Morality

[47:10]

We have trouble because we confuse love with desire. Love is not desire.

* Love Chocolate Cake - they don't love chocolate cake.

Love seeks the good of that which is loved. Jesus' teaching about right & wrong, good & bad is caught up in love. Everything Jesus taught us to do is an expression of love.

Who is a Good Person?

[48:20]

(def.) - *"A person who is intent on advancing the various goods of human life with which they are effectively in contact in a manner that respects their relative degree of importance and the extent to which the actions of the person in question can actually promote the existence and maintenance of those goods."*

(That's the kind of statements people hate philosophers for.)

Who is a good person? What Jesus is talking about is life.

"the goods of human life in the degree they are good"

You'd not be careful to make sure everyone has strawberry ice cream.

What's important in goodness? What you can actually change and make a difference with.

"Moral Enthusiasm" - people get enthusiastic about things that they can actually do nothing about except to make trouble for people around them.

That's why neighbor love is so important. The person that is near you. That would mean above all - our families, neighbors, workplace is the primary place where redemption and **the Church** should flourish. The church has a role in making community but its primary task is to redeem the communities that are already here. When it doesn't do that, humanity falls into messes like such as the one we are involved in about marriage.

We are in a situation today where our moral knowledge has disappeared setting aside Christ as a teacher, as one who is smart.

Do you think of Jesus as smart? Try it out. Try it on your friends.

Ask, *"Who is the smartest man that ever lived?"* See who you get.

In case you're wondering, it was Jesus. No one has ever come close. No matter what your field is, He is the best man in your field. When Jesus speaks, we want to hear Him in that way. When we don't hear him in that way, our moral bearings disappear because we can not find how to get a hold of good & evil in our understanding but, above all, in our life. The object is not just to know it, the object is to do it.

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Teaching Institutions

[52:30]

Our teaching institutions are churches because our churches are often the influence of our educational system, does not provide knowledge of good & evil, right & wrong. This is as a result of the social displacement of the teachings of Christianity itself.

I don't know if you appreciate what has happened, but over the last 75 - 100 years, the teachings of Jesus, the fundamental doctrines of the Christian church, which had up till then, been taken as knowledge of reality, were displaced into the domain of faith and faith was displaced in to the domain of the absurd and ridiculous.

* Archie Bunker, *"Faith - what you wouldn't believe for your life if it wasn't in the Bible."*

Faith is treated as something that actually is even opposed to knowledge and truth.

Those displacements that have occurred in our world have brought us to a place where Jesus Himself and His magnificent teachings about What is good? Who is good? How to be good? are lost from the domain of knowledge.

Is the spiritual life in the domain of knowledge? The answer is yes. Knowledge that can help human beings flourish and prosper and be ready to meet God when they do them.

We Christians have to be sure what we bring to the world and what we live by is not just a leap, a guess, a hazard, a wild surmise, but knowledge of reality.

Knowledge

[55:15]

(def.) - *"The ability to represent something as it is on an appropriate basis of thought and experience."*

* You want your dentist, mechanic and your cook to have knowledge in that sense. You don't want them to just have faith. "Do you have faith that the tooth needs to be pulled?" No, you want them to have knowledge.

The environment of faith in the Bible is always knowledge. That's why the Bible speaks of knowledge constantly. Faith biblically is opposed to sight not to knowledge. Faith is actually kind of knowledge biblically.

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Sometimes we do have faith or believe things we can't know that's why there is a difference between belief and knowledge. Sometimes we can't know, we have to act, we have to believe something. But you don't want to live like that. You want to be able to believe what you know. If you do that your life is going to be much better as it otherwise would be.

Faith is grounded in knowledge.

Faith is what you have on a basis of your knowledge of God.

As I say that you're running up against things you've heard in your education and elsewhere. Put that up against what you've learned in the Bible.

Knowledge confers rights & responsibilities to:

Act, direct action, formulate & administer policy and to teach.

You realize why it is important for so many people to exclude the content of Christian teaching from the domain of knowledge.

Separation of Church & State

[58:00]

It is good but not in the sense it is ordinarily considered today. Today what is called "faith" has no serious bearing on life. If the teachings of Christianity, what is called "faith" represented what was vital for life of human beings, there would be no more talk of separation of Christianity & State than there would be a separation of Chemistry & State.

The guiding assumption is what you have in Christian teaching has no bearing on the reality of life. That's also why people say all religions are equal. Anyone who looks at religion knows they are not the same. Saying they are all equal is like saying, "They are all equally irrelevant."

Once moral knowledge disappears, political correctness takes over.

Moral direction without knowledge becomes political correctness.

The reason PC became so important recent years is because moral knowledge disappeared. PC does not require knowledge, it only requires advocacy. That's why in this country people are urged to vote regardless if they know anything about the issues. Knowledge is not required to vote. That's what it means to speak merely of political correctness.

Reclaim Knowledge

[1:00:40]

We must reclaim knowledge. We must say the content of Christian teaching is a field of knowledge. Remember what we said knowledge was. We must

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be honest and sure we've worked that through that we have knowledge not just faith. We have to make sure we have worked that through. You'll still have plenty of room for faith but you don't want your faith without knowledge.

When you take the basic teachings - "*Mere Christianity*" is knowledge for those who are willing to invest the effort required to know it. If someone does not know it, that does not mean it's not knowable.

* Multiplication Tables - "I don't know them." You'd say, "Find out."
Not, "Maybe they are unknowable. Maybe you just have to faith."

* "*I don't know that God exists. I'm an agnostic.*"
Agnostic sounds fancy. Latin for "agnostic"? It's ignoramus. "Agnostic" sounds fancy. Ignoramus doesn't sound so fancy.
A person who says they don't know has not demonstrated anything.

* "Do you know you airport gate?" "No, I'm an agnostic."

We have to reclaim knowledge. I don't mean on the cheap. I don't mean asserting, close minded, dogmatic. We have to honest, open and thorough. That's what has been lost in our culture. It's only the church tht can go back an claim that.

Then we can look at the three parts of the Great Commission

1.) Make disciples, not Christians, not even Baptists.

2.) Surround them in the reality of the Trinity

3.) Teach them do everything Jesus said. Help them grow on the inside. (Tomorrow evening we're going to have to talk about just this one point. [[Session 2 - "Spiritual Formation: Obedience"](#)]

To grow on the inside to the point where they routinely and easily do the things Jesus said.

Teach - you bring knowledge!

Spiritual Renewal comes in the form of obedience from the heart - to draw on the resources of **the Kingdom of God** in such a way we are actually able to do and be the person Jesus has called us to be and has made possible for us to be.

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I end with a reigning verse. It's talking about how "sin" reigned.

Romans 5:17 - *"To those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through One Jesus Christ."*

That's you, that's me.

I don't know how you feel about reigning in life. Is that where you are?

We come to reign in Christ by stepping into obedience to Christ and the goodness, rightness and power of the Kingdom of God where we are. God's intention for each of us is that we should grow to the point that He can empower us to do what we want.

Did I make a mistake? Did I get a pronoun wrong?

That's our destiny. To grow to the point to do what we want.

Obviously work on the "wanter" has to be done.

We are training in reigning for reigning...that's why we are here!

~ ~ ~ End of Session at 1:07:00 ~ ~ ~

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