



God on Broadway

Week 3: Wicked

Brian Mattson - 01/23/2026

Fashion is a funny thing. It's fascinating to flip through old magazines or watch period movies or TV shows where the outfits and styles seem so foreign. I remember going to see Titanic in middle school and being thankful I didn't have to wear formal clothes every day like the characters in the movie. Even the poorer folks on the lower levels of the ship wore slacks with button downs tucked in. There were blazers and waistcoats, dresses and skirts.

A few years ago, I watched every episode of the TV series, Mad Men, which took place from 1960-1970. My favorite part about that show was watching the fashion change from year to year. It started with the buttoned up dark suits and crisp white dress shirts of the early 60s. As the years moved on, the fashion did too. The suits went from gray and black to a smattering of plaids and checks. And by the end of the series, the bright, bold colors of the late 60s and early 70s were en vogue.

It's odd to me when I look around now to see the fashion trends from the 1990s so prevalent these days. Doc Martens. Choker necklaces. Ridiculously baggy jeans. My wife reminded me not long ago that the 90s are to this generation what bell bottoms and groovy shirts were to my generation. The fashion seemed outlandish to us, but humorously ironic to wear around at times.

The ways we alter how we present ourselves to the world—clothes, hair, jewelry—are an ever changing adventure. Styles and looks come and go. They are re-invented and recycled by future generations. I've mostly exited the fashion train, but I occasionally change things up to stay hip and cool. When I was a kid in the late 80s and early 90s, I was a slave to fashion though. There were silk shirts, bowl cuts, Starter jackets, and WWJD bracelets. Ah, yes. The ubiquitous WWJD bracelets of the 90s. Those WWJD bracelets walked so Livestrong bracelets could run. Did you have a WWJD bracelet? Who here doesn't know what a WWJD bracelet is?

It stands for *What Would Jesus Do?* and it was a simple and constant reminder on your wrist to imitate Christ through your words and actions. If you didn't know what to do or how to respond in a situation, you just had to ask yourself *What would Jesus do?* As is true with most things, the idea of asking yourself *What would Jesus do?* wasn't invented in the 1990s. It was a recycled idea that goes back to the 1800s with the famous Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, who used the phrase in a sermon. Spurgeon cited a 15th century Latin book called *The Imitation of Christ* as the source of the phrase.

Not long after the sermon, a man named Charles Sheldon wrote a book called *In His Steps* with the subtitle, *What Would Jesus Do?* This became one of the best-selling books of all time. One hundred years later, a youth group leader in Michigan was inspired anew and had bracelets printed up with the acronym WWJD on them. The original order was for 300. The popularity and momentum after that first batch swelled and the number of bracelets sold in the 90s alone is estimated to be between 15-50 million! I know I had several colors myself, as I'm sure many of you did too.

The fad faded eventually, but it wasn't a failure. There were very real changes in people and habits. A renewed interest in church and Christianity. It was mostly a cultural phenomenon though. I, like many other people, assumed that just by wearing a bracelet I was a changed person, or in a small way imitating Christ. Somehow this braided nylon on my wrist would be the

magical solution to my words, thoughts, behaviors, and motivations. And then when my words, thoughts, behaviors, and motivations fell short of this WWJD-ethos, I removed the bracelet. I didn't want to be a stumbling block for anyone around me. There were some *serious* warnings from Jesus about that sort of thing. I also didn't want to give Jesus and Christianity a bad name because of my behavior, which is also the reason I didn't put one of those Jesus-fish on my car. Hey, I can admit that I'm not always the best or most patient driver.

In theory, those bracelets were a straightforward and practical solution for trying to live like Christ. The simple question—What would Jesus do?—provided clear answers many times. Let's face it, in most situations, what Jesus would actually do is usually pretty easy to deduce. He would do or say the most loving thing. In practice it is much harder. So if the question is easy, but the follow through is hard, how can we attempt to find the way forward? The Apostle Paul had a lot to say on this subject. Unlike the changing winds of fashion, doing what Jesus would do requires more than just changing how we look. It's a transformation process that comes from within.

Throughout his New Testament writings, Paul urges the early Christians to live lives imbued with the characteristics of Jesus—love, compassion, mercy, and justice. We read his words in books like 1st Corinthians, Ephesians, and 1st Thessalonians to be imitators of Christ. But in Romans, his theological masterpiece, Paul offers up his clearest advice.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Romans 12:1-2 NRSV

And when Paul says ‘bodies’ in this section, he’s not referring to our physical skin and bones, flesh and blood. He’s speaking more holistically than that. The Message translation gives more depth and breadth to Paul’s words to help us understand the larger scope of the passage.

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

- Romans 12:1-2 MSG

Paul spent the first eleven chapters of Romans laying out his philosophical understanding of who Jesus was, what he did, and how salvation functions through faith not actions. And now in Romans 12, he gets to the nuts and bolts of how to live like Christ because we are called to do just that. And it’s simple, really—a complete transformation of who you are as a person. Easy, right?

We are not conformed to this world, but we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. That’s step one. Renewing our minds allows us to clearly discern God’s will, or in other words, *what Jesus would do*. And that’s when the transformation takes place: as we know and understand God’s will and then go do those things in our everyday lives. But it takes a leap of faith to undergo true transformation.

Such is the story of Elphaba, the green witch in the Broadway musical, *Wicked*. She was intent to stay in the background, blend in with society, as much as she could, and do what was asked of her by the culture and professors at Shiz University.

There's something different about Elphaba that we come to understand as the story unfolds. She has powers that have been suppressed. Hidden away and discouraged. Her professor, Madam Morrible, begins to help her develop and master her magic. Her reputation grows with other students and professors, culminating in a visit to the Wizard of Oz at the Emerald City. While there, she learns more about the Wizard and Madam Morrible. It finally hits her that they are the ones behind some of the evil that's been appearing at the university.

And she makes a choice, a leap of faith, to become who she was always meant to be. In the song, *Defying Gravity*, Elphaba recognizes the change happening, but to truly see it come to fruition requires action on her part. At the beginning of the song, she sings the words:

*Something has changed within me
Something is not the same
I'm through with playing by the rules of someone else's game
Too late for second-guessing
Too late to go back to sleep
It's time to trust my instincts
Close my eyes and leap*

If you've never seen this song live, it's emotional. It's powerful. It's watching someone become who they were always meant to be right in front of you, something we kind of all want for ourselves and others. But it's not an easy journey. It means things can't go back to how they were. Elphaba transforms into her true self when she quits worrying about fitting into cultural norms

and appeasing unjust authorities. And the result of her transformation is a new found freedom and calling.

Elphaba's transformation *isn't* about becoming powerful. It's about becoming whole. Complete. Who she was always meant to be. It's letting go of external validation from the world, and instead seeking justice, mercy, and equality. And as soon as she transforms into her true self, she is labeled. Wicked. The world has a tendency to reject ideas and people that don't fit nicely into boxes and spreadsheets. But inside of Elphaba is a spark. And to truly see how bright that fire can be, she must go on a journey of transformation.

We all have that spark within us, too, something holy that sets us apart. We are capable of amazing things, but we're often busy making sure we look like the world and our culture. There are times when our true abilities shine through, but rarely are they sustained. Such is the plight of humanity. William Barclay summarizes Paul's thoughts with the words, "Left to ourselves we live a life dominated by human nature at its lowest; in Christ we live a life dominated by Christ or by the Spirit. The essential man has been changed; now he lives, not a self-centred, but a Christ-centred life." Boom. That's the secret. It's not to become the best person we can be for our own good. It's about becoming the best person we can be for the good of others. Serving, loving, listening, giving ourselves away to others. Doing what Jesus would do.

And when we fully commit to being transformed by God's will, we go on a journey of sanctification. And the journey of sanctification is a lifelong process. In our Wesleyan heritage, we understand sanctification as one of the three-fold natures of God's grace. Sanctifying Grace is the engine that sustains and perfects us on our journey to becoming like Jesus, imitating Christ.

The longer we are on the journey, the easier it gets to sense God's will. And the easier it is to be misunderstood. Misjudged. Mislabeled. When we fight for good against those who are desperately trying to cling to their own sense

of power, we might even be seen as wicked. But maybe that means you are on the right path. And the longer you are walking on that road, the more freeing life becomes. John Wesley believed we could become perfected in love in this life. If Jesus invites us to seek perfection, perfect love is possible, in Wesley's eyes. He didn't mean we would be free from mistakes, temptation or failure, but we're still moving in that direction.

Who knows, you might even get to the point where you don't have to look at your wrist to remember to ask yourself *What would Jesus do?* Perhaps one day it will just bubble up from within. I'm not there yet, but I'm on the journey. I took the first step and I know you can too. Maybe you don't know where to start or what to read or how to pray or what to say. That's okay. We can help point you in positive directions. But the first step will eventually be yours to take. It could be as simple as downloading an app to some short prayer meditations. I have a recommendation. It could be reading the Bible, but try it with a good study Bible. The stories and themes, history and culture, will come alive with help from scholars and professors who help make sense of ancient words. Maybe it just looks like attending Dinners Together with other people from church who are curious, just like you. People who are seeking out ways to be different from the culture around us. Christ-centered, not self-centered. Because if you want to fly away from the confines and expectations of the world, you'll have to take a leap. You'll have to believe that you, too, can defy gravity.