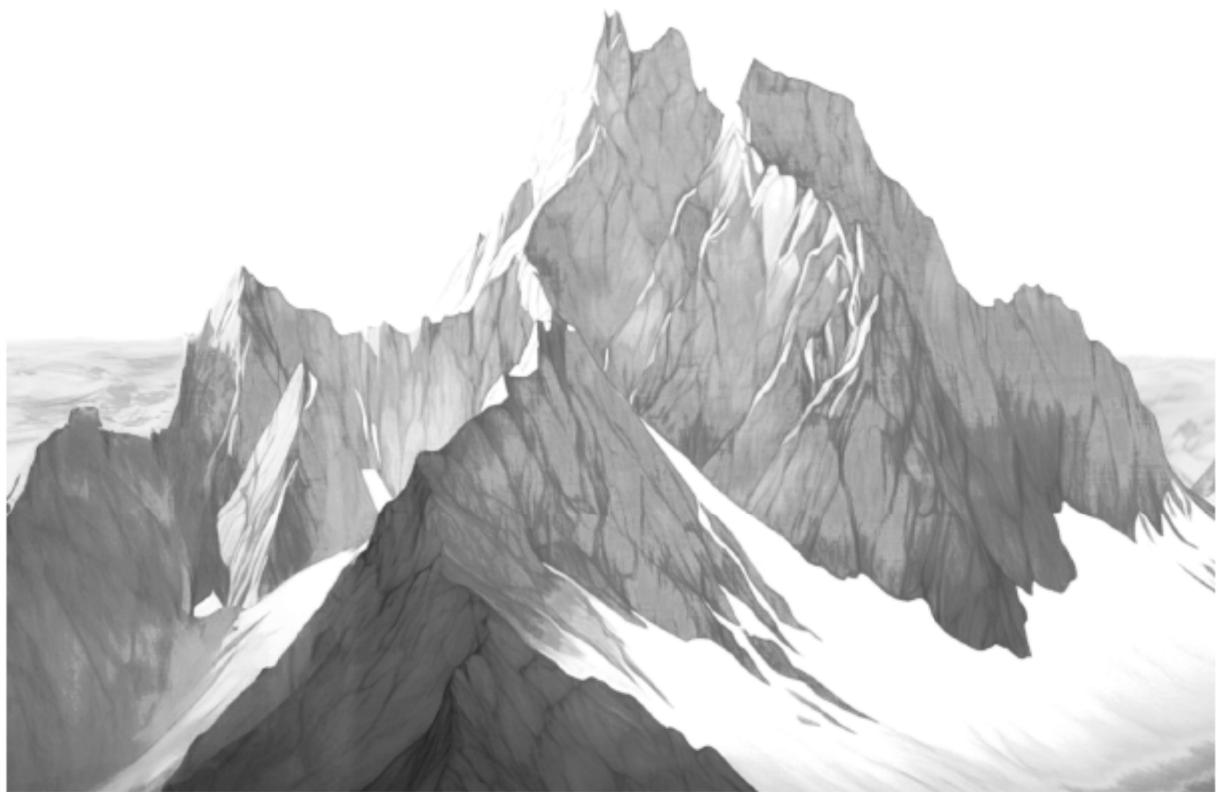

Insurmountable

An in-depth look at Jesus' teachings
in The Sermon on the Mount



Insurmountable *John Ortberg*

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Preface

Many people don't realize quite how much ground Jesus covered in the Sermon on the Mount (myself included, prior to studying Johns teachings here). There's so much content: giving until it hurts, how to pray, understanding divorce, how to live humbly. He talks anger. He talks pride. He talks lying. It's remarkable, the map Jesus drew for us on how to live. Maybe He should have considered cartography instead of carpentry?

What John has written here is rare. It will help you understand this sermon—often hailed as the greatest talk ever given—in a way you likely haven't before. You may even find you relate to Jesus' teachings and His character in a new way. And if you're like me, you'll walk away with fresh perspective on how to put Jesus' commands into practice. John issues simple, practical, and accessible ideas that will empower you to live the way Jesus did.

One thing is for sure: Even if you're intimately familiar with the content of the Sermon on the Mount, even if you've memorized it backward and forward, absolutely no one has mastered it. In his 2000-word plea, Jesus gives us more than enough homework for a lifetime. We could each spend the rest of our lives working on implementation and never fully arrive.

Thankfully, that's not the standard set before us. Praise Jesus.

However, the standard set for this book is the same standard for all John Ortberg books—deeply thoughtful, deeply meaningful, and deeply implementable. Only turn the next page, dear reader, if you wish to broaden your understanding of the greatest sermon of all time by the greatest teacher of all time, analyzed here by truly one of the greatest authors and pastors of our time.

Soak it in.

—Alyssa from the Become New Team

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Introduction

THE SERMON

One day, a rabbi, seeing a crowd of people come to him, went up to a mountainside and sat down—the traditional teaching posture for a rabbi. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach. When he had finished, we’re told the crowds were amazed at his teachings.

And they would not be the only ones.

When he finished, the world had changed. It did not know it yet, but it would never be quite the same.

Whatever anyone thinks of the Sermon on the Mount, it became, in the words of Yale scholar Jaroslav Pelican, “the greatest moral document of all time.”

It is the most studied, contested, written-about, and influential talk in human history. As a matter of purely historical reality, nothing else comes close. The poet Gerald Manley Hopkins wrote, “Nowhere in literature is there anything to match the Sermon on the Mount; if there is, let men bring it forward.”¹

It has continued to haunt hearts and change lives for two thousand years. Many Christians know that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s most famous book, “The Cost of Discipleship,” was written about the Sermon on the Mount; less well known is that it was reading the Sermon that changed his life. He said: “I was lacking in humility... terribly ambitious... alone... then something happened... for the first time I discovered the Bible... Then the Bible freed me from that, in particular the Sermon on the Mount. Since then, everything has changed.”²

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy was brought by this sermon from suicidal despair to faith and hope. He describes this shift in his last great novel, Resurrection, through the conversion of the book’s hero, Prince Nekhlyudov:

“His heart stopped beating... He pictured to himself what this life might be like if people were taught to obey these commandments, and his soul was swept up by an ecstasy such as he had not felt for many a day... He did not sleep that night, and as happens to vast numbers who read the Gospels, he understood for the first time the full meaning of words read and passed over innumerable times in the past.”

He said to himself, “ ‘Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. ’ This, then, must be my life’s work.

One task is completed, and another is ready to my hand.” That night, a new life began.³

The last letter Tolstoy wrote, outside of his own family, was to commend the Sermon on the Mount to a young activist in India named Mohandas Gandhi. Gandhi’s practice of nonviolent resistance and love for enemies, drawn from and along with the Sermon, was to inspire a young preacher and civil rights leader from America named Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Bible is by far the most widely sold (6 billion copies in print, according to The Economist⁴) owned, read, and interpreted book in the world. And the Sermon on the Mount is by far the most widely read passage of Scripture. New Testament scholar Robert Guelich wrote in his book on the Sermon that simply cataloging the books, articles, and sermons dealing with the Sermon is likely not even possible.⁵

St. Augustine, who may have been the first to refer to Matthew 5-7 as “The Sermon on the Mount,” said it is “the perfect measure of the Christian life.”⁶

There is simply no other compilation of words in human history that is more worth reading.

Studying.

Absorbing.

Living.

Its words of life are treasured, not just by the church but by the human race: the Beatitudes, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, going the second mile, the Lord’s Prayer, the Golden Rule, do not worry about tomorrow, store up treasures in heaven, seek first the Kingdom of God, judge not lest you be judged, ask, seek and knock, beware of wolves in sheep’s clothing, the house on the rock.

But there is one wrinkle, and it is why we’ve put this little book together.

The Sermon on the Mount is also filled with statements that have been notoriously difficult to understand-and even harder to live out.

- *I tell you anyone who is angry with a brother or sister is subject to judgment.*
- *If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away.*
- *If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.*
- *Do not swear an oath at all.*
- *If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek.*

- *If anyone asks for your shirt, hand over your cloak as well.*
- *Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*
- *If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*
- *Do not throw your pearls to the pigs.*

Many people do not know what to do with such extreme-sounding statements. Because of this, no other talk or teaching in human history has yielded more interpretations than the Sermon on the Mount. Jonathan Pennington, in his book on the Sermon, says that the dueling interpretations remind him of the words of Mark Twain: “The researches of many commentators have already thrown much darkness on this subject, and it is probable that, if they continue, we shall soon know nothing at all about it.”⁷ Harvey MacArthur surveys a dozen alternative approaches that he quips might be called “Versions and Evasions of the Sermon on the Mount.”⁸

One approach in the Middle Ages divided Jesus’ statements into “precepts” and “counsels.” “Precepts” were commands everybody had to keep, like seeking first the kingdom of God. “Counsels” (like always giving to anyone who asks) were extra-credit instructions for the “Advanced Placement” discipleships, like monks and priests in the “Spiritually Gifted” program. (If you’ve ever heard the phrase “counsel of perfection,” this is where it comes from.)

Now, Protestants didn’t like the two-tier system, but they had other ways of navigating the Sermon. Some adopted the “Impossible Ideal” approach. Jesus took Matthew’s difficult commands and ratcheted them up to a completely unreachable level; the Sermon on the Mount was “Torah on steroids.”⁹ In this view, Jesus was deliberately giving us commands we couldn’t keep, so we would give up even trying and get saved by grace instead. But that approach is hard to square with Jesus’ insistence on “doing my will” and “putting my words into practice” that climax the sermon.

Some people taught what has been called a “Two Kingdom” approach, dividing life into a public and a private sphere. Privately, I might turn the other cheek, but if I’m a soldier (in public office) or in law enforcement, I may have to respond to violence with violence.

Other groups have insisted that even the “difficult” statements must be taken literally. The anabaptists (such as Mennonites and Quakers) took a literal approach that led them to refuse to serve in the military and to refuse to testify in court if it required an oath of truthfulness. An early Christian named Origen took such a literal approach that he castrated himself to avoid sexual sin. But as we will see, it is highly unlikely that Jesus was recommending physical deformation as a means of spiritual formation.

A popular approach in America for much of the 19th and 20th centuries was called “Dispensationalism,” which taught that the Sermon on the Mount contained ethics explicitly intended for a messianic kingdom offered to Israel. Therefore, the difficult sayings in it can be dismissed on the grounds that it was not intended for Christians in general or the church at large.

Other theologians, such as the famous Albert Schweitzer, taught that Jesus believed the world was soon ending and the final kingdom was soon coming. For that reason, the Sermon on the Mount was intended as an ‘interim ethic’ until the ‘soon-to-come end’-like temporary martial law-until peace and order come.

Some have understood it to be a utopian dream that can never be realized. Others simplistically claim the Sermon on the Mount expresses ethical standards that are self-evidently true, common to all religions, and easy to follow. “I live by the Sermon on the Mount,” they confidently say. John Stott writes that the most charitable response to this is to assume that they have never actually read the Sermon on the Mount.

Most of these approaches have been largely discredited in our day, and of course, attempts to better understand these luminous and haunting words will go on as long as people read and think. There are many wonderful resources to help guide us into Jesus’ words; a list of them is in the back of this book. But there is one that has been particularly helpful to many, including me.

Over thirty years ago, I met a man named Dallas Willard. He was a philosopher at the University of Southern California. He was not a New Testament scholar, and yet his understanding of Jesus as a teacher in general and the Sermon on the Mount in particular was by far the most helpful I had ever heard. He had taught a many-week Sunday School class on the topic at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. I got all those cassette tapes (you can google “cassette tapes” if you’re under forty), put them in my Walkman (ditto), and listened to them while jogging until they were warped and worn.

I had read this Sermon my whole Christian life and studied it in both a Christian college and seminary, but as I listened to Dallas’ teaching, it glimmered and glowed and came alive to my mind and, eventually, my life in a new dimension. In a very real way, I was able to make Jesus my teacher as well as my Savior. Some years later, that material was put into a book called “The Divine Conspiracy,” which is generally regarded as Dallas’ magnum opus.

However (and here comes the second wrinkle in this introduction), in my experience, sometimes Dallas writes sentences that are dense to read and cumbersome to plow through. That is the reason for this book. One of the ways I have thought about my ministry is “Dallas for Dummies.” Meaning no disrespect to you, Gentle Reader, but

nobody learns more by my having to try to put these thoughts into words than I! Having taught this material many times over the years, a friend suggested it might be helpful to make it available in written form. So here it is. I have tried to make appropriate attributions to Dallas' thoughts and words, but I'm sure my debt to him runs deeper than what the footnotes reflect, and I want to clearly acknowledge that debt.

I'll also mention just a couple of ways Dallas has been helpful to me so you can keep an eye open for what's helpful to you. For one thing, he has the clearest understanding of Jesus' method as a teacher that I have ever heard. Generally, Jesus did not give laws but rather contrasted "General Prevailing Assumptions" about how things are with examples of what someone living a Kingdom life might do instead. We'll unpack this as we go along, but for me, it opened new windows on how to clearly understand Jesus- and when being "mechanically literal" - is to actually misunderstand his meaning. In addition to this, and in addition to Dallas' remarkable mind, I had never met someone who so urgently wanted to know what is real? What is true? And what did Jesus-or anybody else, for that matter-have to say about this? (Dallas would call this "reading the Bible ontologically.") And it's rare to find someone of great scholarly ability who understands issues in the academic guild and still reads the Bible primarily with that great purpose above all others.)

This means that studying Jesus' Sermon on the Mount can never simply be an abstract exercise. It is only by sincerely, humbly, authentically, creatively, intelligently seeking to do what Jesus said (let go of hatred and lust, stop using my words to spin or control others, practice secrecy to be freed of approval addiction, be freed of judging and "condemnation engineering," and so on) so I can discover whether or not what Jesus claimed is actually true.

And that is the journey that lies before us.

May this Sermon, and the presence of the One who spoke it, now interrupt and arrest and haunt and alter your life and mine, as the lives of millions of others over thousands of years have been joyfully interrupted.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (BIBLICAL TEXT)

English Standard Version Matthew 5-7

5 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

THE BEATITUDES

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons[a] of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. **12** Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

SAIT AND LIGHT

13 “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. **15** Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. **16** In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that[b] they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

CHRIST CAME TO FULFILL THE LAW

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. **18** For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. **19** Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. **20** For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

ANGER

21 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ **22** But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother[c] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults[d] his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell[e] of fire. **23** So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, **24** leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. **25** Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. **26** Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.[f]

LUST

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ **28** But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. **29** If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. **30** And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

DIVORCE

31 “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ **32** But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

OATHS

33 “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ **34** But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, **35** or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. **36** And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. **37** Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.[g]

RETALIATION

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ **39** But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. **40** And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic,[h] let him have your cloak as well. **41** And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. **42** Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ **44** But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. **46** For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? **47** And if you greet only your brothers, [i] what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? **48** You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

GIVING TO THE NEEDY

6 “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

2 “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **3** But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, **4** so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

5 “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **6** But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

7 “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. **8** Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. **9** Pray then like this:

“Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.[j]

10 Your kingdom come,
your will be done,[k]
 on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread,[l]

12 and forgive us our debts,
 as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil.[m]

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, **15** but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

FASTING

16 “And when you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. **17** But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, **18** that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

LAY UP TREASURES IN HEAVEN

19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust[n] destroy and where thieves break in and steal, **20** but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. **21** For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

22 “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, **23** but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

24 “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.[o]

DO NOT BE ANXIOUS

25 “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? **26** Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? **27** And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?[p] **28** And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, **29** yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. **30** But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? **31** Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ **32** For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. **33** But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

34 “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

JUDGING OTHERS

7 “Judge not, that you be not judged. **2** For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. **3** Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? **4** Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? **5** You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

6 “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you.

ASK, AND IT WILL BE GIVEN

7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. **8** For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. **9** Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? **10** Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? **11** If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

THE GOLDEN RULE

12 “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.

13 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy[q] that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. **14** For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

A TREE AND ITS FRUIT

15 “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. **16** You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes

gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? **17** So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. **18** A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. **19** Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20** Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

I NEVER KNEW YOU

21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. **22** On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ **23** And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

BUILD YOUR HOUSE ON THE ROCK

24 “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. **25** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. **26** And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. **27** And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.”

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

28 And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, **29** for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Chapter 1 - The Best News The World Has Ever Heard

YOUR KINGDOM

Danish thinker Soren Kierkegaard wrote an essay on ‘The difference between a Genius and an Apostle.’¹ A genius is remarkable for her or his intellect, creativity or artistry. A genius will dazzle people with giftedness. A genius understands what others cannot. Shakespeare, Plato, and Madame Curie had the extraordinary flair that only a genius brings. A genius is an artist. An apostle, on the other hand, is someone called by God and sent on a mission. The apostle may not be anyone ‘special’ at all. Apostles have the job to announce some reality, to point at a reality beyond themselves. It doesn’t really matter if they point elegantly. Apostles don’t care about style points. All that matters is the reality to which they point.

An apostle is a reporter.

Jesus of Nazareth was both a genius and an apostle. He had an unsurpassed understanding of reality. But like an apostle, he came to announce a new reality. What made him utterly unique is that the new reality he was announcing—the possibility of life within the Kingdom of God for any human being—was made possible precisely by his arrival. He was the genius who invented the church. He was pointing to himself. But with arms that would stretch out to the whole world, like a man with arms outstretched on a cross.

Just before the Sermon on the Mount begins, we’re told in Matthew 4:23-25: “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria”

A key distinction lies, often unnoticed, in this text. We’re told Jesus teaches. He gives instructions or advice on how to live. But we’re also told he preaches, or he proclaims. Today, we often associate preaching with telling people what to do, but the word was not used that way back then. It was not even a religious word. It was a news word. Jesus went around announcing something that had happened.

News.

And it was not just news ... but good news. The Greek word for this in the New Testament is *euaggelion* from a little particle *eu*, which means good. “Eulogy” is good word. “Euphoria” is good feeling. Angelos means messenger. We get our word “angel” from it, and that’s where the word “evangelical” comes from.

In Bible times, “evangel” just meant good news or gospel. That’s what Jesus went around announcing. Most people have heard the word “gospel,” but even most church people do not know what the gospel was that Jesus himself announced. Jesus came to announce a gospel. Jesus was announcing what he believed to be the most important news in human history. And yet, often, people—even people inside the church—are not clear about what Jesus’ announcement pointed to. Which is strange because the New Testament refers to it repeatedly.

The gospel according to Mark carefully identifies what Jesus’ gospel announces. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’” (Mark 1:14-15). Once Jesus chose his disciples, Luke 8:1-3 tells us he went on the road with one message: “After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God.”

When Jesus chose the twelve disciples, were told in Luke 9:1-2: “When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”

After Jesus was crucified and resurrected, Acts 1:3 says he spent his final days on earth talking about one piece of news: “He appeared to [the apostles] over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.”

At the very end of the book of Acts, when Paul is imprisoned in Rome, in the last verse of the last chapter of the book about the church (Acts 28:31), we’re told: “[Paul] proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance.” The good news of Jesus is that now, through him (his body, his life, his teaching), life in the Kingdom of God (God’s presence and power) is available.

Anybody who wants it can have it through Jesus.

Unfortunately, that understanding of the gospel has been largely lost in our day. Many people think of the gospel as the arrangement where, after you die, they have to let you into heaven, what I’ll sometimes call the minimal entry requirements for getting into heaven when you die.¹² But of course, nowhere in the gospels does Jesus announce anything like the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven when you die.

What he does say is that now, through his life and teaching and then death and

resurrection, a new opportunity has come to do life with God. If you want that, then the logical response is to become his disciple.

Jesus' gospel leads naturally to the formation of Jesus' disciples. When churches get the gospel wrong, they produce consumers of Jesus' merit rather than disciples of Jesus' life. Of course, the gospel of Jesus includes the forgiveness of our sins, for which Jesus died on the cross, as the free gift of unmerited grace. The gospel of Jesus also promises that death will not have the last word, that his resurrection means our eternal life with God will never cease. But his gospel includes even more than that!

His news is: The kingdom of God is available!

This is why his great injunction in the Sermon on the Mount comes in Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. "

We don't use the word "kingdom" very often, but as Dallas Willard would often say, everybody has a kingdom in the biblical sense of that term. Your kingdom is the little sphere in which what you say goes.³ We see this modeled all the way back in Genesis 1:26, where we were told, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; let them have dominion...' That's kingdom language. Dominion. Let them reign. Let them have influence. One of the reasons why Dallas has been able to shed so much light on 'kingdom' language is that it involves deep truths about theology, Biblical history, psychology (the nature of the will), and philosophy, and one gift philosophy often involves is the ability to integrate various disciplines. Your kingdom is the range of your effective will, starting with your body. It's what we see in a little child when they learn to talk, walk, or say no. They're learning their body is their kingdom. Then there is the space around your body; that's why if somebody gets in your face, they violate your kingdom. Then, your possessions. Your home.

Some time ago, our family was taking a walk. A man came out of his house and asked us our dog's name. I thought he was just being friendly, so I told him. All of a sudden, he started screaming that we were on private property, his property, and let us know he considered this a violation of his kingdom.

We all have a little kingdom. It has a nature-welcoming, or excluding, or hopeful, or angry, or fearful. Our kingdoms connect and merge and interact with other kingdoms.

So the real question is: Whose kingdom are you living in?

We all have a physical home, and it determines our identity. People who work with identity will sometimes say geography is identity. Where you are determines who you

are. I've been to Paris, but I'm not Parisian. I'm Californian. Similarly, we all have what might be thought of as a spiritual location. It's not physical, but it's real.

Jesus says you can live in the Kingdom of God. He claimed this to be the greatest opportunity ever offered to the human race. In the Kingdom of God, nobody can threaten your ultimate well-being. In the Kingdom of God, you have the abundance of heaven to support you—a flood of ideas and divine generosity. In the Kingdom of God, you are never at ultimate risk.

The Apostle Paul said in Romans 8:28: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is...” Notice this: “...in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Paul describes what Jesus talks about as the Kingdom of God with the phrase “in Christ.” He uses that phrase 164 times. To be ‘in Christ’ is to be in his kingdom, to be in his presence, his power, and his favor. This is the news that makes all of the Sermon on the Mount true and good. Dallas was once at a conference where he'd been asked to speak on the kingdom of God. He announced that he had chosen to speak on a different topic: “Was Jesus Nuts?” What raises that question, Dallas told his listeners, is Jesus’ insistence that in his Father’s kingdom, we truly have nothing, ultimately, to worry about.

The reason we can choose not to worry about tomorrow is our tomorrow is in the hands of the King. The reason we can store up treasure in heaven through generosity is the abundance of heaven belongs to our Father. Jesus isn’t just some guru who walked around making up pretty sayings out of nowhere. He is the smartest man who ever lived, and the brilliance of his teaching rests on the truth of his news. He understood reality better than anybody else.

So, I'll ask again: What kingdom are you living in?

For Jesus, the reality of the kingdom evoked delight and desire. But this is often lost by his followers.

Paul writes in Romans 14:17, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of legalistic rules about what you eat and drink but of righteousness, peace, and joy.”

That's God's kingdom.

The news about ‘the kingdom of earth’ is often frightening. Nuclear weapons. Devastating storms and horrendous loss. Racism. Terrorism. Political polarization. We're

not even sure if we can trust the news to tell us the news or if we're getting fake news. But Jesus' announcement included the news that Jesus had a plan. This, too, is communicated in the Sermon on the Mount.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ”Not: ‘Get me out of earth so I can go up to heaven.’ But ‘Bring the kind of life that marks heaven down here to earth.’ “The time has come. ” How did the time come? What happened? How is the world different today than it was yesterday?

Of course, the answer is Jesus is here. That's why the time has come. This is an audacious claim. Jesus is the kingdom-bringer in his body. In his life, in his words, in his healing (a central part of his ministry because it's bringing God's shalom), in his death, in his resurrection. He is pointing to himself. In Jesus, up there has come down here. This is the most audacious claim in human history.

Then, he delivers the Sermon on the Mount. According to Gallup, more than half of Christians do not know who taught the Sermon on the Mount.⁴ In one poll, 12 percent of people questioned thought it was called the Sermon on the Mount because it was delivered on horseback! The Sermon on the Mount is not just part of Jesus' announcement of good news; it's also, by its own unending brilliance, a proof of its truth. How else does one explain its impact? Harvard professor Harvey Cox wrote that the Sermon on the Mount is “...the most luminous, most quoted, most analyzed, most contested, most influential moral and religious discourse in all of human history...It was [Jesus'] Fifth Symphony, his Mona Lisa, his masterpiece.”⁵ Why? Because he got lucky? Because he was a good motivational speaker? No. The Sermon on the Mount is not general, moral advice to be nice to each other. It is not a series of random sayings by a blissed-out guru. It is not a list of rules. It is a bold, brilliant, life-transforming declaration of reality with an invitation to follow.

Will the gospel of Jesus become your gospel?

The ancient titles given to the four books about Jesus in the New Testament are not “The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark, The Gospel of Luke.” They were called “The Gospel According to Matthew, The Gospel According to Mark, and The Gospel According to Luke.” Why is that? Because it was his gospel, the gospel of Jesus. He defined it. It belonged to him.

Everybody has a gospel. Everybody has an ultimate hope. Everybody is waiting for some news.

If you want to respond to Jesus' gospel, you make him your king. You make him your Lord. You make him your friend and forgiver.

The idea behind the Sermon on the Mount is that we actually do what Jesus told us to do with his constant presence and gracious help. When you do, up there is coming down here. Every time you are angry and tempted by revenge, but instead, turn the other cheek, up there is coming down here. That's why he said to do it. Every time you're tempted to enrich your little kingdom, pile up more stuff, but instead, through generosity, you store up treasures in heaven (which, by the way, are not just for when we die), up there is coming down here.

Every time you're tempted to judge but you "judge not," up there is coming down here. Every time you break through selfishness and "let your light so shine that people see your good deeds," up there is coming down here. Every time you're tempted to make your life about a better lifestyle, but instead, you consider the lilies of the field who live in the Kingdom of God-and you trust God, up there is coming down here. Every time you do unto others what you would have others do to you, every time you let your "Yes" be "Yes" and your "No" be "No," every time you give in secret, every time you pray for daily bread for yourself and for others, every time you ask, every time you seek, every time you knock, up there is coming down here. And it's happening as he said it would all over the world.

It's everywhere.

But often, it's most deeply present where it is least expected. And that leads us to the next chapter; that's how Jesus started his talk.

Chapter 2 - I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE BLESSED

Now seems as good a time as any to tell you that if you're reading this, you might be a mess.

This is a book for messy people. It's for screw-ups and mistake-makers, for people who have serious flaws, for people who have real-time character defects. We're looking at Jesus' good news for people like that. If you're one of them, keep reading.

Here is a passage from the Sermon on the Mount that has been ever-so slightly revised. See if you can tell:

“Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and the smart people came to him, and the beautiful people and the rich people and the people with thick hair, and he said unto them, 'Blessed are you, you smart, pretty, rich, well-coiffed people, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.'”

Did you pick out the inaccurate part?

Here's what the Bible actually says in Matthew 4:23-25, right before Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount:

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every [illness] and [every frailty] among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. [...] Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.”

“When he saw the crowds.” Who is in the crowd? Needy people, poor people, hurting people, people who don't smell good, people who don't behave well. Demoniacs are not noted for their good behavior. In these crowds, people are having seizures. Lepers—the untouchables. People who drink too much, people who can't hold a job, people who can't fix their lives, people who have no money for medicine, people who are on the edge, people who have no hope.

People at the end of their rope.

How will Jesus tell the good news to this motley crew?

The most famous talk in the history of the world had the most famous beginning for a talk ever! Although it's widely misunderstood, Jesus begins with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," (Matthew 5:3).

Let's start with that word "blessed," the first word of this great message. It's often a cliche in our day. We say it when somebody sneezes. In the South, people say it about people they don't even like: "Bless her heart." ("I hate her guts"). In the Bible, this word "blessed" actually addresses a question that haunts the human race: Who has "the good life?" Any serious thinker about the human condition must address this question. The biggest movement in psychology over the last two decades has been what's called "positive psychology," research on happiness, well-being, and flourishing, which is precisely about this question.

Everybody has an idea. There was an ad for a car not long ago: "Chase happiness in a car that can catch it." When I lived in Southern California, there was actually a magazine called The Good Life. Based on its contents, "The Good Life" is mostly about fine dining and weight loss, which is kind of a paradox when you think about it!

(For a more detailed defense of this understanding of the role of the Beatitudes in declaring the availability of "the good life" through Jesus and his kingdom, see Chapter 4 in the Divine Conspiracy.¹ For a viewpoint that agrees with this overall approach but differs on the interpretation of particular beatitudes, see an article by Gregg Ten Elshof.)²

We all want to live "the good life." You really have to think about that phrase when you come to the word "blessed." We've turned it into a cliche, but it's actually a brilliant way to start a talk. Jesus, you had me at "Blessed." Who's livin' the dream? He says of livin' the dream, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Now, what does it mean to be "poor in spirit?" You have to understand it's not a good thing to be poor in spirit. It wasn't in Jesus' day. You might try the phrase, "Blessed are the spiritual zeros, the spiritually bankrupt, people who know nothing about the Bible, people who cannot make heads or tails of God, people who would throw up if you asked them to pray out loud, people who think Joan of Arc is the wife of Noah, people who think the Epistles are the wives of the apostles, people who think that spiritually they have nothing to offer."

It's often associated simply with financial poverty as well. The poor in spirit in Jesus' day generally would have been the poor, and Jesus says, "Blessed are you!" Livin' the dream, baby. Why? Well, it's not because they are poor in spirit. It's because now, through Jesus, the possibility of life in the presence, the power, the favor, the love, the guidance, and the strength of God Almighty has come right down to them. Forgiveness,

grace, strength, wisdom, healing, joy, and acceptance are now available to them-to you. It no longer matters what the world says about you.

Dallas Willard says, “Those poor in spirit are called ‘blessed’ by Jesus, not because they are in a meritorious condition, but because, precisely in spite of and in the midst of their ever so deplorable condition, the rule of the heavens has moved redemptively upon and through them by the grace of Christ.”³

Those in deplorable condition.

That’s the audience for the Sermon on the Mount. That’s who Jesus will choose for his disciples. That’s us. Everybody is welcome. Nobody is perfect. We are deplorable. Nothing more. Nothing better. Jesus is contrasting his beatitudes against who the world says is eligible for “the good life.” Who does the world say is living the dream? Human culture, apart from God, always has its own lists of who’s blessed, who’s living the dream.

We might write the beatitudes for Silicon Valley. “Blessed are the talented. Blessed are the CEOs and the VIPs and the MBAs and the PhDs. Blessed are the slender.”

Or how about, “Blessed are those who hustle.” I’m not making this up: There was a blog post from a car ride company recently praising one of their drivers who went into labor and kept picking up fares on her way to the hospital to give birth. That’s life in our day. “Blessed are those who pick up fares when they’re going to the hospital to deliver their own baby. Blessed are the LinkedIn and the Twitter-followed.”

Then all of the people who are not on that list think, “I’m not eligible for ‘the good life.’ I’m missing out.” Jesus comes to say, “No. The world has it wrong.” That’s why we’re calling this “The Upside Down.” This is reality. It looks upside down. But really, Jesus is setting things right side up. Each person has to ask this question for their own life-since you will base your life on something:

Who's well off? Who's blessed? Who's living the dream?

Jesus has the answer to those questions: Blessed is anyone who is alive in the Kingdom of God. Blessed is anybody who is daily interacting with God in his great venture of bringing up there down here. Anybody who has surrendered the burden of ego; anybody who no longer has to carry the weight of the world’s outcomes on their shoulders; anybody who can even for a moment be truly grateful to God; anybody who does not find their safety in the illusion of avoiding danger. Not because they have so much money or so many connections or so much power, but because they are secure in the reality that nothing can separate them from the love of God.

To be in the kingdom means to be blessed, no matter what else happens. Your future is secured. Your present is redeemed. What Jesus is saying in the Beatitudes, these words of blessing (that's what 'beatitude' means), is that even the people regarded as the most deprived, the most insignificant in the world, can now be blessed by living in the Kingdom of God. Jesus is saying: Anyone who has put God in charge of their life is blessed.

“Blessed are those who mourn... ” Who are they? Blessed are those whose spouse has deserted them. Blessed are those who have lost their job—yes, even when it was their own fault. Blessed are you who consider yourself a miserable failure as a parent. Blessed are you who wanted to be a parent but could not. Blessed are the chronically depressed. Blessed are the clinically anxious.

Why?

Because mourning and anxiety are a good thing? No. Because to you, Jesus comes along and says, “You, too, come into my kingdom. I will be with you. You will not be alone. You have a future. You may be at the end of your rope, but you’re not at the end of my rope!”

“Blessed are the meek... ” Nobody in the world, apart from God, puts meek people on “the good life” fast track! No company has a “Meek Employee of the Month” award. Nobody lists meekness on their Match.com profile. “Hey, man, want a bargain in the dating world? I’m meek.” This beatitude is saying, “Blessed are the charisma-challenged. Blessed are the inept self-promoters, for you will inherit the earth as up there comes down here”

And so it goes on through the list. None of the conditions listed in the Beatitudes are thought of by our world as tickets to “the good life.” That’s why Jesus mentions them.

And then there is, “Blessed are the persecuted. ”The idea of the Beatitudes is that no human condition excludes blessedness now that Jesus is in the equation. He himself was the great misfit, the great outcast, the great failure so that all of the misfits, outcasts, losers, and failures would find their way into his great upside-down kingdom.

In Jesus’ community, we help others to see us as we really are. Rule number one in the Jesus community is “No Pretending.” We come just as we are to God and to one another to be loved and healed. Everybody is welcome, nobody is perfect, anything is possible.

One of my first dates with Nancy was a double date with another couple. They were really good friends with her, and I wanted to make a good impression on them and on

her. But at dinner, I made the mistake of ordering barbecued spare ribs. I was wearing a light-colored shirt. When I picked up my first rib, I immediately dropped it onto my shirt. I thought if I held my right arm close to my chest, I could hide the stain so nobody could see it. But this meant I had to eat with my left hand. I picked up a second rib and spilled it all the way down my shirt and my pants. By now, I was an absolute train wreck.

So I deliberately picked up a third rib, dipped it into the barbecue sauce, and spread it directly onto my clothes. I figured as long as I'm going to make a mess, as long as I'm going to be stained, I might as well let everybody know about it. The next time we had dinner with them, we were at their house. They set their table in a beautiful, elegant way, but there was a newspaper under my chair—I kid you not! That was 36 years ago. They've never had us over for dinner again.

The disciple John put it like this (I John 1:9): “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ”

One of the reasons why A.A., which began as a discipleship movement, is so powerful is that anytime somebody talks, they begin with, “My name is John; I’m an alcoholic.” The other people in the circle do not respond by saying, “I’m shocked and appalled.” They say, “Hi, John.” A great Christian thinker, a student of this movement, writes, “The wisdom of A.A. is contained in its celebration of an addict’s recognition and public acknowledgment that he is an addict. Such recognition and acknowledgment is deemed an achievement and is celebrated by being ritualized and reiterated.”⁴

It turns out that genuine, humble, costly, real-time, radical public admission of my inadequacy, my inability to change, my inability to control my own life, to resist sin, is part of what God uses to make change possible, to make a healing community possible. So often, it gets missed in the church.

A.A. groups often meet in church basements, and they have a saying for everything. One of their sayings that haunts me is this: “When you come to the church, you can come downstairs and be changed, or you can go upstairs and stay the same.” Downstairs, there’s no pretending. Downstairs, everybody is a disaster without God, and downstairs, everybody is blessed. “Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. ” God wants the church to be as real and as raw as A.A.

I attended several A.A. meetings to learn about their methods. After one of the meetings, a guy came up to me and said, “I love A.A. It’s just like the church but with swearing. Damn, I’m sorry.”

Well, here's the deal: I want to live without pretending. So often, I pretend to be nicer than I really am. Can I say that? I pretend to be modest when I'm a recovering praiseaholic just waiting for my next binge. I pretend to be brave when I'm really a coward. I get prickly. I withdraw. I envy. I covet other people's gifts or success. Thank God I've never had any issues with sexuality or lust (that's a lie).

The sad reality is that there are churches where nobody has sinned for 20 years, and everybody is dying. What kills the church is not sin. What kills the church is pretending there's no sin.

So together, we are going to practice the celebration of inadequacy. We don't hide it. We don't pretend that we're something we're not. We don't pretend we've been Christians long enough that we don't have to worry about sin anymore, that we can rest on our spiritual laurels. No pretending here. We're the church of the open stain. Why? Because "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn." In Jesus' community, we learn to see others the way God sees them. We are entering into the "upside down."

(Note not part of the book: See the chapter of Abba's Child called the Imposter, by Brennan Manning which will be added to the end of this book)

In the Beatitudes, Jesus is also teaching people how he sees them. When Paul came to understand this, he put it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:16: "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view." The old translation is "We regard no one 'according to the flesh.'" What is that? That is simply the system of evaluation that everybody uses. What do they own? How do they look? Where do they live? Who do they know?

In the year 2000, a couple of Silicon Valley engineers had an argument over the attractiveness of a specific woman. As a result, they started an attractiveness rating website called Hot or Not. This inspired a similar site at Harvard called FaceMash, which eventually got renamed Facebook. Within a week, Hot or Not was getting two million hits a day. You could post a picture of yourself, then people would rate how attractive they thought you were. The ratings were rank ordered and posted publicly-and everybody knew what was behind it: Blessed are the hot. Woe to the not.

Dallas writes that if you look at ads today, they will tell you who the unblessed are... the fat, the misshapen, the bald, the wrinkled, the ugly, the awkward, the uneducated. These conditions are experienced in our day as "unconditional personal condemnation." Even though people know it's silly to be so worried about their bodies, they feel this deeply. But just to say, "How silly of you," does not bring Jesus' good news to them. We need Jesus' gospel, for we live in a silly world. Sin is silly. If the gospel did not reach us in our silliness, who could be saved? Ask God to help you practice looking at people differently.

I was at a post office recently. A woman was there who had a skin condition that had badly and permanently disfigured her face. At first, I felt awkward and turned away, but then I thought, if that was my daughter, how would I want people to relate to her? We had a conversation, and I was so humbled by her mind and her spirit. I challenge you to look past the skin. Look past the resume. Look past the clothes. Look past the flesh. Ask God to help you see what He sees in people.

Jesus goes even further still in the “upside down.” He brings the possibility of blessing to the addicts, to the brutal, the boastful, the bigots, to the drug lords and the pornographers. It is no wonder that people said of Jesus, “This man is a friend of sinners and eats with them,” (Luke 15:2).

This is the insurmountable power of Jesus’ gospel and the staggering depths to which it reaches: “If I, as a recovering sinner myself, accept Jesus’ good news, I can go to the mass murderer (to the betrayer, to the adulterer) and say, ‘You can be blessed in the kingdom of heaven. To the worshiper of Satan, To those who rob the aged and weak, to the cheat and the liar, to the bloodsucker and the vengeful. There is forgiveness that knows no limits.’ Blessed! Blessed! Blessed! As they flee into the arms of the kingdom among us. These are God’s grubby people.”⁵

That’s us: God’s grubby people.

“In their midst a Corrie ten Boom takes the hand of the Nazi who killed her family members. The scene is strictly not of this earth. Any spiritually healthy congregation of believers in Jesus will more or less look like these ‘brands plucked from the burning.’ If the group is totally nice, that is a sure sign something has gone wrong.”

“For here are the foolish, weak, lowly, and despised of this world, whom God has chosen to cancel out the humanly great. Among them there indeed are a few of the humanly wise, the influential, and the socially elite. They belong here too. God is not disturbed by them. But the Beatitudes is not even a list of spiritual giants.”⁶ We’re the inept. We are the fellowship of the open stain. We are the celebration of the inadequate.

But that’s not all we are.

You may have noticed that Matthew 5:1 says there are two groups listening to Jesus’ talk. He says, “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” In other words, there are the crowds (he saw the crowds), and there are the disciples (the disciples came). Matthew refers to ‘the crowds’ over 40 times in his gospel; they function like a Greek chorus. The crowds are people who are interested in Jesus. They’d like his help with

their problems. They admire his ideas. They are amazed at his teaching. But in the end, it is the crowds who cry out, “crucify him” (Matthew 27:22).

Matthew refers to disciples and discipleship over 60 times. The disciples are people who used to be part of the crowd but have now committed themselves to following wherever Jesus goes and doing whatever Jesus says. The disciples are just as stained, just as needy, just as poor in spirit. They misunderstand him, fail him, exasperate him, doubt him, deny him, flee him. But what they’ve said is, “I must have what this man offers, so I will do whatever it takes. I will learn whatever he teaches.

This is the greatest opportunity I have ever had, and if getting in on this means I miss everything else in life, I will do that with joy.”

And they become his students, his apprentices.

Every once in a while, somebody leaves the crowd and becomes a disciple.

Somebody stops just admiring and starts to follow.

Blessed, blessed, blessed.

And that could be you.

Chapter 3 - Overcoming Evil

OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD

Evil is a word that doesn't get used a lot in our day. We're not sure what to do with it. In ordinary conversation, it sounds a little Victorian, a little melodramatic. It sounds like it may not be that scientific—or maybe it'll be used in a movie with a comic villain called Dr. Evil.

A leading media personality had a conference on the subject of evil in Aspen, Colorado. The outcome of that meeting was most of the participants there did not believe evil actually exists. (Although, if you're going to consider the possibility of human evil, is Aspen, Colorado, really the right place to go for that?)¹

If we cannot make sense of and learn to live with hope in a world of evil, we're just whistling in the dark. We're haunted by these questions: What is evil? Where does it come from? Will it triumph? How can it be overcome? Above all, how are you and I to live in a world where evil wreaks havoc, for each one of us must make a life?

Now, unlike a lot of folks—including a lot of thinkers in our culture—the writers of Scripture (Jesus in particular) were very familiar with the subject of evil. Evil, at its core, is quite simple. It is “to will the bad.” Love is “to will the good,” to intend and work for God's good in somebody else's life. Evil is its contrary; it is to will the bad. It's not particularly mysterious or confusing. God is love.

His kingdom, as we've been learning, is the sphere where His will is done. His kingdom, above all else, is the kingdom of love. To indulge evil, to choose evil, is to oppose God's kingdom. That's why in the prayer where Jesus says, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done.” (“God, make up there come down here.”), He also says, “Deliver us from” (Matthew 6:10, 13).

Evil is different from psychopathology. It is different from mental health problems, although, of course, evil is mentally unhealthy. Evil doesn't just happen to us; it happens in us. The Christian thinker Soren Kierkegaard wrote a book called The Sickness Unto Death. He talks about how evil progresses. Somebody (a self) suffers pain and hurt, gets bullied or mistreated. The self broods on it, turns it over and over, heaps all of his passion on this pain until it becomes what Kierkegaard calls “demonic rage.”²

At this point (demonic rage), the self doesn't even want to be delivered from this pain. It's become an identity. Being the victim of mistreatment from others is what makes me superior to others. When evil is fully formed, a person lives simply to inflict pain on

others, to vomit pain out on them as his accusation against existence, against God himself. That's evil.

The truth is, anytime we want to do something we know is wrong, it always requires hiddenness (or the illusion that we can hide it). But in reality, nothing of consequence stays hidden. Good and evil ripple out far beyond their origins; that is the nature of kingdoms. "Kingdoms" is the biblical word for systems of personal influence. And we know the line between good and evil runs through every human soul.

We make choices all the time without even being aware of the fact we're doing this, to brood over something, to clutch onto something, to hide. We sin, and then we justify not confessing our sin or making things right. Then we find a way to bury that thought, so we kind of forget. Sin after sin compounds moment after moment after moment like some kind of terrible interest in our souls.

About the best our culture generally can do for the human condition is to suggest education. Education is generally a good thing, but well-educated people can choose evil. Jesus and the biblical writers say our great problem is not ignorance. It lies in the will, not the intellect. Only a leader, only a thinker, who is able to account for evil, who can explain it and then provide a way or a hope to not be overcome by it, is worthy of a human follower.

I believe Jesus is unrivaled in the way He has done this. Jesus' follower, the Apostle Paul, wrote at the end of one of the great passages of moral-spiritual truth in human literature, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21). Remarkably, this gets to why evil is the core problem.

Any other force or damage can only happen to you. Bullying, sickness, injury, insult, or death... none of those can separate you from the love of God. The follower of Jesus has, over the centuries, laughed at every one of those.

Being overcome by evil is the ultimate tragedy that can befall a human being, and nothing else comes close. Suffering happens to you, but evil happens in you. Evil will claim your thoughts. Evil will twist your desires. Evil will corrupt your will. Evil will damn your soul.

I know that language sounds odd in our day, but that says more about our day than it does those realities. Whose job is it to fight evil? That's the job of the church. Other organizations might do a lot of good things—they might go after poverty, illiteracy, hunger, or providing nicer transportation or better clothes. But it is the church's task to battle evil, and the very fact that it sounds laughable in our day is an indicator of the tremendous need.

Where is this battle between good and evil fought? This is not a battle where we in the church are the good guys and we go out to fight the bad guys. It's not out there; it's in here. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in The Gulag Archipelago of befriending a fellow WWII officer with whom he had shared similar convictions and hopes. But after the war, fate threw them on opposite paths; Sozhenitsyn's friend became part of the oppressive regime that used torture to interrogate prisoners. Solzhenitsyn wondered at how two good friends could end up so different. But one idea he knew was untrue was that he was wholly good and his friend wholly evil. He was convinced that, under the right (or rather wrong) circumstances, he could have ended up just like his friend. "If only there were vile people... .committing vile deeds, and it were only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."³ That is why evil cannot be overcome by evil, hate, or even by force, which is always the world's way.

How is the battle fought? Overcome evil with good within your soul, your will, your mind, your body. It is the soul, alive and trusting in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love, that can be delivered from evil and can have a small part in overcoming evil with good.

Now we come to these sublime words of Jesus in Matthew 5:10-12 which mark the end of the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. "

Those are very strange words. Strange because they violate the mental map most of us have about reality, and we have to use kingdom talk to discuss our mental maps. Generally, my mental map is: If I'm going to have "the good life," other people must like me. They must approve of me. They must think well of me. They must boost my sense of self-esteem. They must do what I want them to do. My kids must get into the right schools, where they will earn grades, which they attribute to my genetic excellence and superior parenting. And further, If I want a spouse, I must have one who is attractive and supportive and a skilled mind reader. My boss must give me raises. My friends must sing my praises. My customers must happily buy my products. My neighbors should write notes of gratitude that they get to live near me.

Then we run into reality. We run into real people, and it's painful. Here is a definition of reality from Dallas Willard. "Reality is what you run into when you're wrong."⁴ Sometimes, the most important reality is unseen reality. We are often skeptical about the human capacity to know reality. If you go to Stanford and ask, "Where is the

Department of Reality?” it turns out they don’t have one. They don’t have a department of good or evil.

But Jesus does.

We all have a belief about how things are. We all have a theory of reality, whether we think we do or not. You cannot act, you cannot live without one. I have a mental map that tells me: “I am who others say I am,” “Other people must do what I want them to do,” and “If I don’t get treated the way I want to by others, it will be unbearable.” Then we run into the glass door. Other people’s maps don’t actually revolve around my idea of reality. Jesus says when evil comes, when people mistreat you or are mean to you, you can still be blessed in an evil-happening world if you are living in the kingdom of heaven. What does that mean for us, practically? It means, first of all:

We learn to live in a kingdom perspective.

When they hear the word heaven, most people think of a place really far away, but let’s look at a few verses in Genesis. When a woman named Hagar was desperately alone with her little boy, we’re told, “... the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘[...] Do not be afraid’. A few years later, Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, Isaac, and the Lord called to him out of heaven and said, “Don’t touch the boy.” Many years later, a man named Jacob saw the Lord standing next to him and said, “God lives here! [...] This is the awesome entrance to heaven!”

In every one of those passages, and many more like them in the Bible, heaven is here because God is here, and God interacts with us. This is Jesus’ mental map of reality. A huge problem for those of us living in the kingdom is we think of God as far away and our universe being filled with empty, lonely space. We feel alone.

An analogy from Dallas Willard is very helpful in thinking about how spirit and space relate to each other. Years ago in the Soviet Union, there was a scientific institute where the brains of Communist leaders were analyzed under microscopes. They hoped to find the secret of great Communist personalities in their great Communist brains. Of course, they found no secrets there because you don’t find a person that way.⁵

If you took your body apart one atom at a time, looking for you, the real you would never be found that way. From the viewpoint of a single atom, your body would be vast, mostly empty space. Yet you inhabit your body. You can use your body to express yourself, your spirit. Your eyes are the window of your soul. Roughly speaking, God inhabits all of space like you inhabit your body. He is everywhere. There is nowhere where he is not. This is the kingdom of the heavens.

Paul is quoting a Greek poet in Acts 17 when he says, “For in him [God] we live and move and have our being.” He is closer than the air you breathe. When we live in a world filled with evil, we learn to live in the perspective of the reality and availability of the kingdom. Perspective will always determine your response.

I read once that a (surely apocryphal) daughter at college wrote to her mom:

“Dear Mom, sorry I haven’t written sooner. My arm is broken and my left leg too. I broke them when I jumped from the second floor of my dormitory... when we had the fire. We were lucky. A young service station attendant saw the blaze and called the fire department. They were there in minutes, and I was in the hospital for a few days. Paul, the service station attendant, came to see me every day. And because it was taking so long to get our dormitory livable again, I moved in with him. He has been so nice.

I must admit that I am pregnant. Paul and I plan to get married just as soon as he can get a divorce. I hope things are fine at home. [...] Love, your daughter, Susie. P.S. Mom, none of the above is true. But I did get a C in Sociology and flunked Chemistry. I just wanted you to receive this news in its proper perspective.”

It turns out that proper perspective is always a matter of stepping back so you can take in the larger picture. Perspective means putting things in their proper place. That’s what Jesus does. He doesn’t say, “Now that I’m here, you won’t have these problems anymore.” He doesn’t say, “If you’re a good Christian, everyone will like you.” He doesn’t say, “If you find a good enough church, all the people in it will be emotionally healthy.”

What he does say is, “If you’re living in the kingdom, you are no longer living at the mercy of what other people think of you or how they treat you.”

Other people or circumstances cannot threaten your ultimate well-being with your Father, even if they’re mean to you, even if they kill you. Part of the gospel of the kingdom is this world is a perfectly safe place for you to be.

This is Jesus’ claim, and it is not a naive one; it’s the claim of a man who got crucified. He asserts that this world is a perfectly safe place for you because of where God is. This is news fresh from the Department of Reality: God is closer than the air you breathe. We now live in a new perspective: God is always here. This is the kingdom. Then, when evil happens, we learn to live without judging other people.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged... ”It’s fascinating. There’s a whole field of research and psychology called the fundamental attribution error. It can be summed up like this:

“When I see somebody else doing something wrong, I tend to attribute it not to their having tough circumstances but to their being a bad character. However, when I find myself doing something wrong, I tend to attribute it not to me having bad character but to me having difficult circumstances.”

Jesus says to just get out of the judging game.

Of course, that doesn’t mean we don’t discern good from evil. But it does mean we don’t use contempt as a tool to navigate relationships. I am no longer in charge of the department of straightening people out. God is. This week, if you’re at McDonald’s and the person behind the counter is surly, you don’t have to be surly back. You can think maybe they’ve had a difficult day or a hard upbringing. You can try your best to bring them joy.

When your family is together and your crazy Uncle Ralph starts to say crazy Uncle Ralph things, you don’t have to roll your eyes. You don’t have to get sarcastic. You can just smile and say, “Uncle Ralph, Jesus loves you, and God knows how hard I’m trying.”

If you’re living now in the reality of the kingdom, you don’t have to be afraid when evil comes your way.

Here’s what the Apostle Paul wrote: “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. [...] It is the Lord who judges me, ” (I Corinthians 1:6). A lot of times when people are mistreated, they feel wounded, or they’re afraid of a confrontation. In response to fear, they placate. They pretend to agree. They go into avoidance mode. In the kingdom, you don’t have to respond out of fear because God is right here.

In 1955, a Sunday-school-teaching Jesus-follower named Rosa Parks was told she had to move to the back of the bus because of the color of her skin. She said no, and they put her in jail. She got threatening phone calls and death threats. She lost her job a few weeks later. They claimed it wasn’t because of the boycott; they were just firing her.

She followed the Savior, who said, “This world can throw you in jail. It’s a perfectly safe place to be because no one can separate you from the love of God.” She was used by God in that moment to inspire a nation. It was a great moment in my life when, as a young minister, I got to meet Rosa Parks. She died in 2005 at age 92 and was the first woman to lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda. Thirty

thousand people stood in line to pay their respects to this woman who was not allowed to sit in the front of the bus. She was living in a different kingdom.

Living in the kingdom of our friend Jesus also means that when evil comes your way, don't retaliate; you are automatically trying to inflict pain back. The Apostle Paul put it like this in Romans 12:17: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. "So many times, we might think somebody is trying to be mean. We get defensive when that may not be their intent at all.

This week, if you feel hurt, I challenge you: Don't immediately jump to the conclusion that inflicting pain is the intent of the other person. Stop, listen, pray, and ask, "God, is there something I can learn here?" Even if you do experience evil this week, remember: you live in the kingdom. Don't repay evil

for evil. Don't repay insult for insult. Don't repay hurt for hurt. Don't repay pain for pain. Overcome evil with good. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, say all kinds of evil things about you falsely."

You have to decide what you believe, but I will tell you those were not just words to Jesus. He was the kingdom in our midst, and he was persecuted his entire life. Herod tried to kill him when he was a baby. Because of him, his family had to flee to Egypt when he was a boy. At the end of his first sermon in Luke 4, the congregation got offended and tried to stone him. He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton. He was called a half breed and a Samaritan. People said he was in league with the Devil. Judas betrayed him. Peter denied him. The religious leaders, who should have embraced him, condemned him. The crowd mocked him. The soldiers beat him. The Romans crucified him. Oh, yes! Jesus knew what he was talking about!

Ask yourself this question: What other historical figure has been portrayed as the victim of more insults, more slander, more hostility, more rejection, greater shame, deeper failure, worse evil than this man Jesus, who said, "Blessed are you"? We're told that when Jesus was hanging on the cross, the crowd mocked him. They even used his own words: "This man saved others. Hey, save yourself. You're the savior guy!"

In that crowd, I wonder if people thought about or said Jesus' words, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, say all kinds of evil against you"?

Jesus certainly didn't look very blessed hanging on that cross. That's what Rome did. That's how our world operates. Somebody threatens you, you threaten them back. Somebody gets you; you get them back. Somebody hurts you; you hurt them worse. In Rome, when somebody threatened them, when somebody got in their way, they would execute them. They would hang them on a cross at a place

called Calvary. That's the way the world works. They knew that would be the end of it because they knew what happens at Calvary stays at Calvary.

But not this time!

What happened at Calvary on the third day has spread all over the world. It is Jesus who says to you, "Blessed are you in the kingdom of my Father. Blessed are you when evil comes your way. When you're hurt, confused, perplexed, blessed are you."

In the kingdom, you don't have to respond out of fear because God is right here. That's the gospel of the kingdom.

Chapter 4 - When Christians Get It Wrong

GLITTERING VICES

Did you ever take dance lessons?

I did not grow up dancing. It was against the rules. I went to a Christian college that was strict about no dancing. You could not dance if you were on campus. You could not dance if you were off campus. You could not dance if you were on the faculty. You could not dance with your spouse if you were married and on the faculty. They did not even allow married faculty to have sex standing up because they believed it might lead to dancing.

It was not until I moved to California, got married, and became a Presbyterian that I thought it might be okay to dance. So I went to a dance studio. I was given a little book I could study. It gave me instructions. It even had a little diagram about where to put your feet. I now know how to waltz. I got the book. I know the book. I can do the book. But if there is one quality my dancing lacks, in a single word, it would be grace. There is a certain mechanical, robotic quality to my dancing. You see, I know dancing like a Presbyterian, but I do it like a Baptist.

As a dearly-loved preaching professor named Ian Pitt-Watson wrote about this analogy years ago: “You can know the Book, and I hope you do. You can do the Book, and I hope you do. But without grace, there is not much life, beauty, or goodness in it.”¹

So I got the book. I studied the book. I could do the book.

No grace.

Then the strangest thing happened. This lovely brown-haired girl asked me if I would dance with her. She is a California girl. She grew up kinda Baptist but not legalist. (She actually got a job working in a movie theater while going to a religious college that didn’t allow movie attendance. She talked them into it. Don’t know how she did it. She still does stuff like that.)

She grew up dancing. She dances with grace.

As I danced with her, some of her grace spilled over onto me. I began to dance a little more gracefully, too.

We religious people have a problem. Religion can produce people who know the Book,

do the Book, but there's no grace. Too often, we end up producing rule followers instead of Jesus followers-

Christians who are mechanical, unfeeling, joyless, lifeless, fearful, judgmental people who end up mostly being known for what they are against! Then we wonder, "Why don't other people want to come to church and be like us?"

Now Jesus knew all about this problem with religion. This actually gets to a question that haunts the human race. Who is a good person! What is it that makes someone a truly good person? We can never get away from this question.

This is what Jesus says:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. "

Then, this climactic statement. *"For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."*

The rest of Matthew, from chapter 5 on, unpacks this last statement:

"... unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees ... you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."

I always used to think that the last verse was bad news. I knew the Pharisees would fast twice a week, memorize the whole Bible, never look at a woman. They had a really high bar. I thought Jesus was saying I have to clear an even higher bar, or I can't get into heaven. But that's not what Jesus is saying. Jesus is not saying, "These religious leaders have a lot of righteousness, and you need even more than they had."

What he is saying is, "They don't have righteousness at all, not the real kind of righteousness."

One time, he described their lives like this:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. [...] You are like whitewashed tombs..."

Jesus didn't make a lot of friends with this talk. "... *which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.*

In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness, " (Matthew 23:25-29).

Jesus is talking about what it means to be a good person. These religious leaders defined a good person in terms of external compliance with the law, somebody who does the right things and avoids doing the wrong things, somebody who follows the rules. A few centuries later, Saint Augustine had a wonderful phrase for this. He talked about what he called "glittering vices."

A glittering vice is a quality that looks like a virtue, but it makes me proud, arrogant, and unloving, so it's really destroying my soul. Winston Churchill from England had a political rival named Stafford Cripps. Cripps was a brilliant member of Parliament, a really austere character, kind of self-righteous, quite disapproving. He is what Mark Twain used to call "a good man in the worst sense of the word." His one known vice was to smoke cigars, and eventually, he gave even that up. When Churchill heard, he said, "Too bad. Those cigars were his last contact with humanity." Churchill also said of Cripps, one day when Cripps got up to walk out of a room, "There but for the grace of God... .goes God."²

Many things that are good in themselves can become glittering vices. I can believe the correct doctrine. I can hold the right political ideology. My sexuality is just right. I have a great work ethic. I have a glittering family. I do what Jesus said. But it's possible to focus so much on doing the right things that you fail to become the right person. Do you have any glittering vices? I know I do. But here's the thing: Focusing on external compliance neglects the condition of the heart, of the inner life.

My nephew, Ryan, is a California Highway Patrol officer. He stayed with us during his training. One day, I asked him, "What do officers look for when they pull somebody over on the road?" He told me the exact habit that makes it most likely that somebody will get pulled over. Since he told me that, I have never been pulled over. I would tell you, but I don't know you well enough. But here is what they never do: they never pull somebody over and say, "Yes, you were in compliance with the traffic laws, but I didn't sense it came from your heart. While you were driving, your very face indicated a grudging spirit and a lack of joyful, wholehearted submission. So, I'm writing you up for failing to contribute to vehicular shalom. Your heart wasn't in it."

Human legal authorities deal with behavioral compliance. What God wants is a transformed heart. We are called to "inside-out goodness." So, anytime you are reading

the Bible and Jesus talks about the righteousness of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you have to put that word “righteousness” in quotes. Their rule-following orientation caused them to focus on outward actions while their inner thoughts and desires remained corrupt.

The wrong kind of righteousness generates great social pressure on others. Those who focus on following the rules become deeply self-conscious of how much they’re giving up, how hard they’re trying to be good, grinding it out. They demand other people see and be impressed by them. They resent what they have to give up. That’s what religion will do to you and me. A tragic result is that religious people have given righteousness a bad name.

The New Testament uses what once were wonderful, attractive words to describe goodness. We need that, but those words have all taken on baggage in our day, so they do not sound desirable to us. Imagine you were going on a blind date, and you asked the person who set you up, “What is she like?” They used these words to describe her: “She is really sanctified. She is holy. She is saintly.” Most people are not drawn to those words.

Growing up in a Scandinavian family, the only sex education my dad ever got was when he was going off to college. His mom pulled him aside and said to him, “There are bad girls at college, John.” His inner thought was, “Where do I find them? How will I know where they are? If rule-following is so bad, it seems like it might be more fun to date a rule-breaker. That’s where the fun is!”

People thought maybe that’s what Jesus was saying. They would listen to him teach and think, “Maybe because he is critiquing the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, what he is really saying is the rules don’t matter. It’s more fun to break them.” But then, do you want to marry a rule-breaker? Is that the answer to life? Do you want to raise a little rule-breaker? When you’re undergoing brain surgery, do you want your neurosurgeon’s last words before they put you under to be, “Man, I cheated and partied my way through med school. I kind of regret that now. Wish me luck!”?

Rule-breaking isn’t the way to go, either. That’s why Jesus starts this section, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.” Jesus says that because when he critiqued the righteousness of the Pharisees, people thought maybe he was trying to abolish the law and the Prophets. “Maybe that’s the way to live. Maybe we can just cut corners, take shortcuts, seize the day, follow our bliss, and enjoy the good life. That’s what grace is for.”

Jesus says, “No!” “... not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law... ”The law rightly understood and fulfilled is the

greatest gift God gave the human race outside of Jesus himself. We all need to know this! That word righteousness is a wonderful word that needs to be rescued.

Centuries before Jesus, the philosopher Plato wrote in the Republic about what the condition of the soul must be for people to live well and to manage to do what is right and good. The old Greek word for what he called that condition is *dikaiosune*, righteousness.³

When the Hebrew prophets' teaching about God's intent for human goodness, about *shalom*, was translated into Greek, that same word, *dikaiosune*, was used. Jesus deliberately chooses a word that brings together the two great strands of moral reflection in the ancient world. To seek to become a truly good person in and with God is the most important thing you can do, more important exponentially than being successful or rich.

The law of God, rightly understood, humbly studied, and practiced through the power of the Spirit, is a gift of God to the human race that is sweeter than honey and more precious than gold.

It's not about following rules; it's about following Jesus.

It's not about breaking rules; it's about following Jesus.

The call of Jesus to follow him is in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness..." If you're going to seek the kingdom of God, there could be no other word that would follow than "... and his righteousness..." These two go together. Righteousness is simply what your life looks like when you're living in the reality of the kingdom because the goal of your life is not rule-following. It's not sin avoidance. It is fullness of life.

That's the only way to live in the kingdom.

Writers who work the soil have a helpful analogy. Imagine you have a huge field and you do not want to have weeds. Nobody likes weeds. The best way to avoid weeds is not to spend all of your time pulling weeds. The best way to not have weeds is to grow a lawn so full of thick, beautiful green grass that there's simply no room for weeds.

Duke scholar Norman Wiersba writes that after four months, a single rye plant will send down 15 million roots-380 miles. The roots create contact with an area of over 2000 square feet. If you include the tiny hairs connected to the roots, the overall root system extends to 7000 miles in length and 7000 square feet in surface area. The life crowds out the death.⁴

In other words, you cannot avoid sin by trying to avoid sin. That's what people so often misunderstand about religion. You avoid sin by pursuing life. Jesus did not say, "I have come that you might avoid sin and avoid it with gritted teeth." He said, "I have come that you might have life and have it with abundance running out your ears."

The failure to do this, the failure to attain a deeply satisfying life, will always result in temptation looking good and eventually sin. The only way to fulfill the law is to live in the abundance and grace of the kingdom, with the presence of Jesus, who died on the cross to forgive us and rose again to give us hope.

Don't be a rule-follower. Don't be a rule-breaker. Live in the abundance of the kingdom and practice surpassing goodness-until your righteousness surpasses that of the rule-followers. Surpass it. Don't just give outward compliance. Out of the abundance of the kingdom of God, his presence, power, and strength in our midst, let love and joy flow out of you toward others. This week, when you're at home, instead of doing the minimum you need to do in order to avoid trouble with your spouse or roommate, step into the kingdom at home. Live in the abundance of the kingdom. Offer surpassing righteousness.

Recently, Nancy and I were in a room together, each working on separate projects. I was working on this, trying to concentrate. I'm an introvert. I don't like to be interrupted. Nancy is a raging extrovert. Interruption is her primary love language. She was reading a book called Deep Work. The author talks about the power of focused attention and how much you can accomplish if you are undistracted and uninterrupted.

She kept getting really excited about what she was reading, and anytime she gets excited, she has to talk. So she would just say, "John, listen to this about the power of sustained attention. It's amazing!" Five minutes later, "John, you're going to love this about what happens when you have unbroken focus." Literally three minutes later, "Oh, John! This is fabulous. Let me read to you about how much you can get done if you avoid being interrupted."

I said, "Why are you interrupting me to tell me how great it is to not be interrupted? If you think it's so great not to be interrupted, here's an idea: Try not interrupting me for a little while, and let's see how that goes." She didn't interrupt me for a long time after that. It's amazing how much she didn't interrupt me-but it was not my most righteous moment.

When I live in the reality of the kingdom, I can say, "God, my time is in your kingdom, and you have more than enough time. I don't have to be rushed and preoccupied with my little agenda." This is what it means to live in the kingdom. This is why obeying Jesus is impossible if I'm not living in the reality of the kingdom.

In the kingdom, I can live in unhurried love in this moment, one moment at a time. Think about this: The difference between the Good Samaritan who did God's will versus the religious leaders who did not do God's will was that the Good Samaritan was willing to be interrupted. He had time. When you're at work, whether you're paid or volunteering, don't just follow the rules; so many people, so many Christians are just clock-punching, rule-following conformists. "What's the least I need to do?" But not you! At work, step into the kingdom and offer surpassing goodness. This is the way Paul describes this: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart..." That's surpassing goodness. "...as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving," (Colossians 3:23-24).

Six months before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a group of students at Barrett Junior High School in Philadelphia about their dreams for the future. He talked about how we're all called by God, whatever work we're doing, whether it looks big or not. He said, "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'"

Whatever you're doing (entering data, teaching students, selling products, writing code), whatever it is, do it with surpassing goodness. "God, how can you help me? How can we partner together to solve problems, to help my coworkers, to work with joy?" As followers of Jesus, we ought to be the greatest worker because we're offering surpassing goodness.

This week, when you talk to people, don't just be on autopilot. Don't just give socially acceptable words. Speak with surpassing goodness. Encourage them! Love them! It doesn't have to be perfect. They'll get your heart.

A man came up to me at a conference. He had a copy of a book I had written and said, "Thank you for writing that book. That's the best book I've ever read." Quite surprised, I said, "Really?" He said, "Yes. I don't read much." That diminished the compliment just a little bit, but I got his heart.

Remember, if you're a follower of Jesus, the aim is not behavior modification. Jesus put the distinction like this in Luke 6:45: "Good people bring good things out of the good they stored in their hearts. But evil people bring evil things out of the evil they stored in their hearts. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

My aim must not be just to say good things and avoid saying bad things. My aim is to

have God change the automatic flow of thoughts and desires inside me to make that flow truthful, humble, generous, hopeful, and brave so that good words naturally come out.

How do we pursue this? How do we store up good things in our hearts?

One really important way to aim at changing the inside of the cup, to change the automatic flow of thoughts in your mind and perceptions, is to memorize Scripture so those thoughts are always present in your mind. But, of course, the human condition can turn memorizing Scripture into a glittering vice. I can compare how I'm doing with other people, thinking of it as this kind of spiritual merit badge, making it into a competition. When I was a kid growing up in Sunday school, we actually had a contest to memorize the twenty-third Psalm. For every verse we memorized, we got a little white sticker to go in our Bible. I was pretty good at it, but there was one little girl in my class who was better than I was. I was memorizing the Word of God, but she memorized the Word of God faster than I memorized the Word of God. It kind of ticked me off, so I killed her.. .a little.. .in my heart.

So, be careful not to turn memorizing the Bible into a glittering vice; it doesn't mean you're a spiritual giant. If it makes you proud and self-righteous, it can make you worse. But if you do it as a means to that end of having a changed inner heart so your mind can think these glorious thoughts any time you want to, so when you're standing in line at a store someplace, you don't have to pull your phone out and check the Internet to keep you from being frustrated, bored, or anxious....

You can have these fabulous thoughts available to you when you wake up in the middle of the night. God can use that to begin to change the inside of the cup. This week, if you're driving a car, if you're lucky enough to have a car, remember you have all the time in the kingdom. Slow down. Be grateful you have a car. Just say, "God, thank you." Let somebody else in front of you as an act of kingdom generosity.

Another way you can offer surpassing goodness is with your money. I was talking to a friend of mine who said he used to be irritated when somebody on the street would ask him for money. Then he sensed God nudging him, "Just give when somebody asks." I know it's not the ultimate answer for poverty, it's not a systemic solution, but giving will help your heart. And remember, it's not up to you whether or not they use it well. A lot of times, you don't use your money well. Just give. My friend started doing that. When somebody would ask him for money, he'd pull out his wallet and give a bill. Then God said, "Give the big bills. If you have one in your wallet, give the big one." He did, and God has blessed him financially in remarkable ways.

This is not about how to get more money. It's not like "get rich" is the kingdom's goodness. No, it's living in the abundance of the kingdom and offering surpassing

goodness. This week, remember, if you've been a rule follower grinding it out, there's a better way. If you've been a rule-breaker flouting God's law, there's a better way.

I love the way Jesus put it in a statement not widely known, but it's a beautiful image. "To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance, (Luke 11:17).

Can you hear it? That's Jesus on the flute. He's our great Pied Piper. He's calling you to a life of surpassing righteousness and joy out of the overflowing abundance of God's great love and generosity.

Know the Book. I hope you do.

Do the Book. I hope you do.

But don't stop there. Step into the kingdom.

When you step, do it with a little style, would you?

Do it with a little grace.

Are we dancing yet?

Chapter 5 - How To Be Good And Angry

ANGER

We once had a neighbor who just looked for stuff to get angry about: if a tree in somebody else's yard blocked her sight line, if she could hear music from another house, if somebody brought their garbage can in late. Our house was a little old and dingy. We saved up, and we painted it. She complained about the color scheme we chose for our house! She said it messed up the feng shui of the neighborhood. I didn't even know our neighborhood had feng shui!

One day, she called and left a message (this was back in the old days of answering machines) about our yard and how much noise our kids made. I was going to let her have it, and then I remembered Jesus said, "Love your neighbor." Jesus also said, "Love your enemy." I said, "God, if you want this woman to receive love and patience, I will have Nancy call her."

I realized I enjoyed indulging my irritation at this woman's anger problem. I would remember examples of her irritability and recite them to others and myself as evidence of my own spiritual superiority. I didn't love her. I didn't seek to love her. I finally realized she wasn't my problem; I was my problem.

We have a tendency to divide the world into two groups: people who really have problems and normal people like me. In contrast, Jesus divided the world into these two groups: people who really have problems and know it and people who really have problems but think they don't really have problems.

So, let's talk about anger.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, redefines what it means to be a good person when it comes to dealing with anger. These are amazing-initially really confusing but ultimately deeply inspiring-words from Jesus.

"You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift. Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you

are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. ”

Anger is a universal human problem. In the ancient world, there were no police departments or district attorneys. The rich and powerful could get away with anything. Because of this, the Old Testament protects the weak. It is where Jesus starts. The Old Testament said, “You shall not murder... ”If somebody was killed, then a blood avenger could chase them down and execute the murderer. The blood avenger would usually be the fastest, toughest, strongest guy in the family, like Vin Diesel or The Rock.

That was actually a huge step forward in justice in the ancient world. But over time, with human nature being what it is, people in Israel started thinking that when it comes to anger, there are two kinds of people: good people and bad people, murderers and non-murderers. “As long as I haven’t actually iced somebody, then I’m in the good category. I’m in the clear on this law.”

As Jesus begins to describe a good person, a kingdom kind of person, he starts with anger. He then goes on to address sexuality, then relational unhappiness, dishonesty, and so on.

The Sermon on the Mount is often treated as a collection of just random sayings-but it’s not. The order of topics in the Sermon on the Mount is very important, and I believe Jesus starts with anger for a profound reason. Anger is the number one offender of spiritual life.

Look in the Bible, starting with Cain and Abel, then Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, and all the way through. Then look at real life today; according to the National Center on Domestic Violence, 20 people a minute are physically abused by an intimate partner. Look at unpleasant workplaces, miserable marriages. The vast majority of human wrongdoing involves anger and contempt. If you could eliminate anger problems, you would eliminate the single greatest cause of human misery.

Why is anger the number one problem?

Well, it has to do with your kingdom. We’ve been looking at Jesus’ good news that the up there Kingdom of God is coming down here through him. Everybody has a kingdom. Your kingdom is wherever your will is in charge. Your will is your ability to choose, to create, to initiate. It’s a form of energy. It makes things happen.

What is anger? Initially, anger is the spontaneous response when our will gets thwarted. Anger is your will saying, “Hey! Something is getting in my way!” The will is energy,

so anger is a form of negative personal energy. The purpose of anger is to alert us something is wrong and energize us to take action to correct it.

This almost always immediately moves to, “I will the harm of whatever it is that obstructs my will. I want to destroy it.” For example, I’m in a hurry to go to an important meeting. I’m running late. I notice my shoe is untied. I bend down to tie it, but I’m in such a hurry that I yank it hard, and it breaks. My first thought is, “This stupid shoelace!” A shoelace can’t be stupid because it has no intelligence. We have smartphones. We don’t have smart shoelaces. But when I’m angry, I desire to harm this stupid, stupid shoelace! That shoelace thwarted my will. It should be destroyed.

Here is the problem: Is the world set up to always please your will? No! So you get angry a lot.

I grew up playing tennis. A tennis player will hit a bad shot and get angry. Not at himself. The angry player will break the racket-willing the destruction of the racket-because it hit the shot.

There was a man in Bellevue, Washington, whose car got stuck in snow. The man became furious. He took the tire iron and smashed the windows of his own car, got out a pistol and shot all four tires, reloaded, and emptied a clip into the car. The police chief of Bellevue said it was a case of “autocide.” Now, of course, the number one cause of anger in people is not shoelaces, tennis rackets, or cars.

Do you know what it is? It’s other people.¹

Pretty soon, instead of thinking, “That stupid shoelace” or “That stupid racket,” I think, “That stupid person.” And therein lies the problem Jesus is concerned about. It’s not just that my emotions are aroused. The problem is not even that my will has been thwarted. The problem is now I will harm to another person. I want to believe they’re stupid, bad, and deserving of bad things. This is the second dimension of anger. It quickly moves to the will to harm. It makes us desire harm to someone else.

To Jesus, it’s never okay to cease to will the good for another person. Let me say that again. To Jesus, in the kingdom of God, it is never okay to cease to will the good for another person. Never! That’s why he is so concerned about anger, why it’s so fundamental. “You have heard that it was said, ‘... anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. ’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment,” (Matthew 5:21). The word he uses here indicates intense anger, orgizomenos. Jesus deliberately describes the consequences in identical languages. ...anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry... will be subject to judgment. ”

Really? Just for getting angry?

This seems unbelievable. It's such an impossibly high bar that people have tried all kinds of ways to wriggle out of actually having to obey what Jesus said. Some people say, "In the Sermon on the Mount, he was offering the kingdom of heaven to Israel. The Sermon on the Mount was an ethic for that kingdom, but Israel refused to make him king. So, the Sermon on the Mount doesn't really apply to us. We don't have to worry about that."

That's not true. Some people have said Jesus is only referring here to unjustified anger—he must have meant only unjustified anger is forbidden. This was so prevalent that many of you (depending on your translation) will have a footnote in your Bible stating that some ancient manuscripts add the phrase, "Anybody who is angry without cause at their brother or sister..." In the ancient world, there were no printing presses, so every Bible was hand-copied. Often, scribes copying the text would think, "Jesus couldn't have meant angry for any reason; he must have meant if you're angry without cause." So they actually added those words. They were saying, "Unjustified anger is bad, but I'm experiencing righteous indignation. So, of course, that's okay."

No, actually, that's not what Jesus was saying.

Some people say Jesus has taken the high bar of Moses and made it even higher—so we would realize it's impossible to obey Jesus. "So as long as we believe the right doctrine about Jesus, we can go to heaven without ever intending to obey him."

No! Jesus said, "...anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment."

When people reinterpret Jesus so they don't have to obey what he said about not getting angry, it makes me angry, although really it's more righteous indignation. You know, one of the dangers of anger is present right there. We enjoy it. We like it because it makes us feel superior. You never meet a humble, angry person. Anger feeds human vanity.

Jesus' teaching on this is really simple. It's not particularly complex; it's not hyperbole. God never stops willing the good, ever, for anybody. Never! God is perfectly capable of simultaneously discerning and judging someone's actions as evil, of knowing precisely how much of it is due to their genetics, how much is due to the environment, how much is a personal choice, and at the same time, wholeheartedly willing that person's good. God can do that effortlessly. But for me, as soon as I start to indulge in anger, I tend to stop willing the good for the person I'm angry at. As soon as I cease to will somebody's good (this is not a feeling; this is an act of the will), then God's will is not being done in my life. God always judges that as an evil thing. "I'm choosing the kingdom of self over

God's kingdom." Anger is dangerous because it justifies not willing the good of another person.

Then anger moves to another phase, to contempt. Anger becomes contempt that leaks out of us. Jesus continues on because indulged anger never stays buried-it leaks. He gives two pictures of this: Anyone who says "Raca" is answerable to the Sanhedrin. Anyone who says, "You fool!" is in danger of the fires of hell.

In that day, *raca* was an insult. It's a guttural sound, kind of like the sound you make when you're about to spit on somebody. Spitting is a gesture of contempt. Anger moves us toward contempt. "You worthless piece of..." Often, contempt involves the language of filth. Now some people will read what Jesus says here and think, "I don't explode. I don't yell. I don't curse. I don't have an anger problem."

Oh... yes, you do. We have an infinite number of ways to convey anger. How we look at somebody, how we don't look at somebody, how we speak to someone, how we don't speak to someone, how we touch them, how we avoid touching them, sarcasm, sabotage, forgetting, passive aggression, withdrawing, avoiding, placating somebody out of fear, or appeasing wrongly can be every bit as and sinful as exploding in wrath.

Now, here's the point. Jesus is not giving a new set of harder rules. Sometimes, people mistakenly read Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount as a new list of hard rules. Sometimes people will think, "Okay, I'm not allowed to murder anybody, I can't call them *raca*, and I can't call them fool. But fortunately, there are a lot of other bad words I can use."

Let's not miss the point.

Jesus is not giving new rules here; he is illustrating what it looks like to have a heart that's pervaded by love to will the good. This is the inside-out goodness, surpassing goodness. There's a bumper sticker in our day, "There is no excuse for domestic violence," and there is no excuse for domestic violence. It is evil in God's sight, and it must be stopped. But here is the key: You cannot eliminate domestic violence by trying to eliminate domestic violence while leaving the toxic, angry thoughts, desires, and feelings of the heart unchanged. You can't avoid anger by trying to avoid anger. If my heart is not transformed, anger, the will to harm, and sin will triumph and sneak out of me in a thousand unseen ways. Anger eats behavior modification for breakfast.

Next, we look at Jesus' teachings to learn how living in the kingdom can transform our angry hearts.

What does that look like?

Jesus began by talking about three things not to do. You don't live with will to harm. You don't say destructive things like raca or fool. Then, he goes on to give two positive illustrations of what a kingdom person, a person of surpassing goodness, does. Again, these aren't laws; they are illustrations.

Now, let's look at the four methods Jesus talks about regarding how to live in the kingdom when it comes to anger.

1. Make reconciling a broken relationship a higher priority than doing something religious.

Jesus says, "You're bringing your gift to the altar, you're doing something religious, and you remember somebody has a problem with you. Maybe they're right. Maybe they're wrong. Maybe it's a mix. It doesn't matter." Jesus says do reconciliation first. That's what love would do!

I was traveling at the airport recently, and I was in a hurry. It was my own fault that I was running late. I was in the security line and it was taking forever. These were some of the thoughts going through my mind: "People in this line are so self-centered. They bring children who move so slowly. They take computers out of bags with no sense of urgency. They're wearing shoes that have to be untied and belts that have to be unbuckled when they know they're going to have to take them off."

Standing there, I realized I was viewing every person in front of me as my enemy. They were obstacles to me getting through the line. It was my own fault I was late. I'm supposed to be a minister of Jesus, but in that moment, this is what was going on inside of me: "Fool! Fool! Fool! Fool!" It wasn't coming out of my mouth, but it for sure was in my eyes, my face, and my body. And I admit, I do this—even when I don't have a deadline—because I'm addicted to hurry and self.

The invitation from Jesus is not, "Okay, grit your teeth and avoid murder. Try really hard not to say raca or fool. Everything else is fair game." No, his invitation is this: Die! Die to your ego. Die to yourself and the kingdom of self. Live in reality. Recognize, "I cannot, by the sheer force of my tremendous will, make a line move faster. I am not in charge of airports, traffic, weather, or TSA. I live in God's kingdom, not mine."

I can let go of everything that is not in my control, and I can actually will the good for the people in this line. So, I did that. And then I started talking pleasantly to people. "What a great hat! Where did you get it? Can I help you get your suitcase in the bin?" Do you know what? I actually arrived on time. But even if I had gotten there late, I don't think God would have needed any aspirin! I don't think his kingdom would actually have been damaged.

In God's kingdom, I cease being attached to my will being done, and I live in the goodness of God's kingdom. That is the blessing of living life without anger. One of the things those people living in God's kingdom do is they seek reconciliation before doing something religious.

Let's think about this for a moment. Sometimes, reconciling will be really complex. It may take time. It may take years. It may take multiple conversations. I know. Part of that is in the hands of another person, and they may never be willing to do that.

One of the best guides I know to help distinguish between forgiveness and reconciliation is Everett Worthington. He is more or less the guru on forgiveness research in our day. He explains that forgiveness is unearned, and it is a journey I take together with God. Reconciliation, on the other hand, must be earned through trust (which is not always possible), and it is a journey two people must go on together.²

However, we are all tempted to rationalize not pursuing reconciliation, even when it might be possible. We think thoughts like: "This problem is not my fault. This relational breakdown is not my responsibility. He should make the first move. I know she'll never change—I know that. I'm harboring no ill will, so I'm in compliance on this one. I don't have to go seek reconciliation. My conscience is clear. I'm not living with angry feelings." But Jesus did not say, "If your brother or sister has a problem with you, manage your emotions so you don't feel anger." Contempt avoidance is not love. Love wills the good of the other. Yes, it can be complex. The other person might be utterly hardhearted. Maybe all you can offer God is genuine willingness. But, my friends.. .an awful lot of people let themselves off the hook when it comes to reconciliation. Love seeks reconciliation. Love wills reconciliation. If you're not doing that, if you're not willing it, if you're not open for it, if you're not seeking it in a significant relationship, do not kid yourself that you are obeying Jesus.

You can't control the outcome, but you can give your heart—which brings us to the second how Jesus gives us on living in the kingdom when it comes to anger.

2. Initiate genuine kindness to your foe (to your enemy).

This illustration invites you to suppose someone is taking you to court. You're in a legal or financial battle with them. I know what it feels like to get deliberately shafted by somebody for a lot of money; it makes you mad! So what do you do? Jesus says, "Settle matters quickly..." The word he uses here actually means, "Make friends with; be kindly disposed toward." In other words, genuinely try to understand and help that person. That may not mean doing what they want, but it does mean seeking to do what is best for them in God's eyes.

Or maybe you have a rival at work who has mistreated you. Maybe you have an enemy at school. Maybe you have a difficult neighbor. Maybe you have a very troubled or troublesome ex-spouse. Pray for them. Ask God to show you if there is a kindness you could do for them, not out of fear, not out of obligation, but out of love.

The main point with these examples (seek reconciliation; do kindness for an enemy) isn't "Do these behaviors"-as if they are new laws. Jesus is inviting us to ponder, "What kind of thought life, what kind of feelings and moods, what habits of mind, body, and speech would you find in the kind of person who would routinely pursue reconciliation above religious correctness, who would reach out in non-anxious, genuine warmth to win over an enemy?" When we consider this, we begin to get a vision for righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees, righteousness that takes responsibility for our thoughts-which brings us to the next practice.

3. Be Creative: Jesus is illustrating Kingdom life.

Jesus is not giving new laws about when to interrupt worship or how to go to court. He is illustrating creative possibilities. This brings us to a remarkably helpful description of Jesus' teaching method by Dallas Willard.³

Because of our legalistic tendencies, we constantly tend to turn Jesus' teaching into engineering-type instructions designed to legislate our response in every situation. Instead, Jesus is often correcting what might be called General Prevailing Assumptions, and contrasting them with a creative response that might be offered by someone living in the provision and protection of God's kingdom.

General Prevailing Assumption:

- You hurt me, I'll hurt you
- Only help 'strategic' people
- Avoid needy people
- Avoiding helping pushy people

Creative Kingdom Alternative

- Turn the other cheek
- Have non-family members to dinner
- Give them your shirt as well
- Go the second mile

The creative kingdom alternatives are constantly misunderstood (and dreaded) if they're taken as law. Instead, they are pictures of possibilities of love and generosity and forgiveness available to people living with God's friendship and care. They always require judgment and discernment in being applied to particular cases and people.

So, for instance, Jesus says: if someone forces you to go with them one mile, go with them two. Some context: In that day, everybody would have known that legally, a Roman soldier could force an Israelite to carry his backpack one mile. Those soldiers were the hated enemies, politically and religiously. Jesus says, “If you’re living in the Kingdom of God, will the good of your Roman soldier enemies, not only when they force you, Carry that backpack a mile. ’ When you get to the end of that trip, ask them, Could I help you some more? Could I carry it another mile?””He is not giving a law here. He is not saying, “Well, I’m taking your pack another mile because Jesus said I have to. You don’t want to go another mile? Too bad. Jesus said I have to.” It’s an illustration of how to go out of your way to do something kind for somebody with whom you ardently disagree politically or spiritually. Ask God to help you do it with a generous spirit, not gritted teeth.

‘Turn the other cheek’ means that I no longer have to automatically seek to hurt someone who hurt me. There may be times when physical resistance is necessary (for instance, to defend a child victim from violence). Judgment will be needed.

‘Give to the one who asks you’ does not mean that Jesus is now requiring you to automatically help out a person who will actually be damaged by too much ‘enabling.’ And you do not ‘obey’ Jesus just by going out of your way to avoid the needy help-askers so that you don’t have to turn them down. He’s simply saying that in the Kingdom, we have the means and the heart to seek to be generous rather than following the GPA of ‘looking out for #1.’

Simply understanding this method of Jesus’ teachings is one of the most helpful tools I know to clear up the meaning of those sayings that have often mystified people. That doesn’t mean that it’s always easy to do what Jesus says. But it helps us understand that Jesus makes tremendous sense. And that his call to obedience always involves judgment and creativity, as well as surrender.

This brings us to one more practice, where goodness was at its most stunningly creative.

4. Reflect on the cross.

The cross reminds us there is a great battle between good and evil, between love and anger, willing good and willing harm. Anger tells me, “It’s okay to will the bad for this contemptible person.” That’s why almost all evil involves anger. And it’s why Jesus starts with anger. The battleground between good and evil, between love and anger, lives within every human soul. To put this into practice, every time your will gets thwarted (and it will get thwarted), use it as an opportunity to die to your will, to hand your will over to God. To say, “God, your will, not mine, be done.” Out of the unhurried,

unworried abundance of the kingdom of heaven, I can know the freedom of the surrendered will and learn the joy of a loving heart. “Your will, not mine, be done.” In light of the cross, remember grace alone.

Chapter 6 - Sexuality

LET'S TALK ABOUT SEX

If you ruled the world, how would you stop sexual harassment in the workplace? In our day, what is usually taught in workplaces and academic settings is what might be called the ethic of consent. The goal here is to teach people to recognize when consent for sexual activity is or is not given and to make sure they know they must always honor consent.

Now, why is it wrong... not just wrong, but a heinous evil... to violate consent? Well, the reason violating consent is so evil is connected to what we have been learning through the Sermon on the Mount. Your kingdom starts with your body. Your body is the place where God initially intends your will to reign. When another person uses your body against your will to satisfy their appetites, they violate your kingdom, and that can shatter a soul. That is why the violation of consent is so evil. It is also why power, the assertion of will, and sex are so closely related and so delicately and dangerously connected. It raises a deep question that's not often asked in our day, at least not publicly. What kind of person do you need to be? What kind of habits of will and self-discipline are required in order to be capable of honoring consent?

Jesus and the biblical writers generally were quite clear that it is possible for a person, even a bright person, even a powerful person, to become enslaved by desire. It happens all the time to all of us in one way or another. This is why people may embrace an ideology that strongly supports progressive gender equality or a traditional sexual ethic, but then, in their private behavior, they completely betray the ideology they claim to believe and maybe even thought they believe. Desire has made them lost souls—or maybe eventually predatory monsters.

Everybody receives a spiritual formation. Everybody's spirit, their inner life (thought, desire, intentions), is being formed and shaped all the time, for better or for worse, on purpose or by accident. So, what sort of spiritual formation do you think people like that received?

The greatest opportunity ever offered to a human being is to have our spiritual formation taken over by Jesus because then you can merge your little kingdom into his great kingdom. In the last chapter, we looked at what this might mean as it relates to anger and reconciliation, but now we look at Jesus' teaching on sexuality.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better

for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell, " (Matthew 5:27-28).

The big question is... Who is a good person when it comes to sexuality? In our day, a common thought might be, "Somebody who honors consent." That's sexual goodness: honor consent. In Jesus' day, people often thought like this: "In the Ten Commandments, the seventh commandment forbids adultery, so people who commit adultery are the bad people, and people who avoid committing adultery are the good people."

You might notice in this text Jesus is addressing men. The idea of a power differential between the sexes did not get invented in our day. Sometimes we talk about the double standard when it comes to sex, but that was actually an explicit part of the law in the ancient world. Ancient Roman law, speaking to men, goes like this: "If you should catch your wife in adultery, you may put her to death without a trial, but if you should commit adultery, she must not presume to lay a finger on you, nor does the law allow it."¹

I always show my work to Nancy before it's public. That's one of the advantages of being married to a teacher. When I showed her this quote, she put a big frowning face next to it and wrote, "Not you, buddy." Jesus does not allow what Roman law allowed-in fact, he actually counters it. And Jesus doesn't say what a lot of people then and even now sometimes say: "If a man lusts after a woman, maybe it's the woman's fault. Maybe she dressed the wrong way. Maybe she did something to entice him."

Kingdoms are systems of personal power. People who have power will abuse those kingdoms to protect their reputations and gratify their lusts. We see that happening in a lot of kingdoms today, but Jesus says, "Not okay." According to Jesus, this "looking lustfully" idea is really important and often misunderstood. Jesus uses the present tense here, and the idea is "Whoever looks and goes on looking." He says that lust is the responsibility of the one who lusts. In other words, Jesus is not saying that sexual attraction itself is a bad thing.

Sex was God's idea, and it is very good. God is pro-hormones. Jesus is pro-hormones. Our sexuality is part of who we are, whether we're single or married, whether we're young or old. It is a constant source of mystery, wonder, and joy wherever we are in life. Not long ago, a friend-even older than me-was standing on a crowded shuttle bus. He looked down, and a young woman, seated, was looking directly at him. She smiled. He smiled back. He thought to himself, "I've still got it." Then she spoke. "Sir, would you like to take my seat?"

Lost it.

Jesus is not talking about attraction or noticing attraction; these are part of being human and how God made us. Jesus is talking about someone who deliberately indulges sexual gratification by continued looking—what might be called “the look.” You all know about “the look!”

A woman is waiting on a couple at a restaurant, and the husband finds her sexually attractive. He starts staring at her. He’s doing this in a way to feed his own desire for sexual gratification. You can see it on his face. The woman serving the table knows it and feels awkward or embarrassed or maybe tempted by a certain sense of power it brings. The man’s wife notices it; she feels crushed by it and rejected or angry. If she talks about it, he denies it—so he adds lying to his sin and damages his marriage and dents his integrity. He may think he hasn’t violated the seventh commandment yet, but he has stepped out of the Kingdom of God.

“The look” is a public act with public effect, and Jesus knew all about it.

Let me pause here...in this book, we are embracing radical honesty. We are choosing to live in God’s kingdom. Sexuality is an area that involves so much emotion, embarrassment, shame, hiddenness, pretending. We have to step into the light.²

If you have ever committed a sexual sin of any kind, if you’ve ever looked at something you should not have, if you’ve ever flirted with the wrong person, if you’ve ever given “the look,” if you’ve ever inappropriately tried to attract “the look,” if you’ve ever withheld yourself sexually to hurt your spouse, if you’ve ever been wounded by feeling unattractive, if you’ve ever failed to talk to your kids helpfully about sexuality, if you’ve ever had a single regret, if you’ve ever felt for a single moment like you could use some help from God about some area of sexuality, if you’ve ever said the word sex, you’re in the club. You aren’t alone. We all need help.

Jesus is talking about something far deeper than the ethic of consent. You might think about it this way: We bring to a relationship three dimensions from our kingdom. We bring our commitment (something we do with our will), our emotions or feelings about another person, and our bodies. These three dimensions should be in balance with each other. This is what the biblical writers teach.

Sexual intimacy is God’s invention to unite two souls. It is ultimate physical intimacy. Marriage is the public declaration of permanent and exclusive commitment. It is a promise. So, to be sexually intimate with a person to whom you are not married is to make promises with your soul that you withhold in your will. It is a setup for hurt. It’s going to damage a soul, and that is why it’s a sin. If you’re following Jesus and are involved in sexual intimacy with a person to whom you’re not married, you need to stop.

But Jesus is clearly defining goodness in this sexual arena as something way deeper than just avoiding sex with somebody I'm not married to. All of us are going to need help to be pure from the inside. How do we get that? Here's where Jesus gets really provocative. This is the real head-scratcher for people. Jesus says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away." Does his command strike you as just a little tiny bit extreme? Jesus isn't hiding this; he's emphasizing it! He doesn't say "just any old eye." He says, "your right eye." In Bible times, the right side of the body was the more valuable and honorable side. Your right eye was your best eye. Notice, he doesn't say, "If it's a problem, get an eye patch-or gently remove it." He says, "Gouge it out." And not just that! "Gouge it out and throw it away" You might have been tempted to keep it in a jar. Maybe you might try to reinsert it later on. No.. just put it down the garbage disposal.

What is he saying? It's often thought that Jesus is engaging in hyperbole, that his idea is that we ought to take obedience to God seriously.. .really, really seriously. Of course, not that seriously. Other people have taken Jesus literally on this. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, there was an early Christian named Origen who wrestled with his sexuality with so much guilt and shame he actually had himself castrated so he would no longer be guilty of sexual sin.

That is not what Jesus is recommending. He is actually using some remarkably dark humor to show that true goodness is not sin avoidance. We might think about it this way. If the goal of God for human beings is just to avoid sinful actions, we could do it through surgery. Cut out your tongue, and you will never speak words of deception or harassment. Cut off your hands, and you can never use them for promiscuity or violence. Gouge out your eyes, and you will never look with envy or look at pornography. You'll stop judging people by their looks. You'll stop giving the looks. Cut off your legs, and you will not walk into the wrong place. You won't walk into massage parlors or adult bookstores or the wrong house. Cut off your ears, and you'll never listen to seductive words or gossip. Cut off your sexual organs, and you'll never misuse them. Have your skin removed, and then you won't misuse your nerve endings for sensuality, and you can roll into heaven a sinless, mutilated stump. Should we all do that?

Sometimes, churches will talk about extending the right hand of fellowship. Here, we'll have you extend it, and we'll chop it off and throw it away. Understand that Jesus has a very important point to make. He knew what he was saying when he used this language. God's will for you is not just "sin avoidance."

In Jesus' day, there was a group of rabbis who decided they would avoid adultery by never looking at a woman. If you don't ever see one, you could never lust after one. So, when a woman would come into their line of sight, they would close their eyes, no matter what they were doing or where they were going. They would literally step off of

curbs or walk into trees or buildings with their eyes closed to avoid looking at a woman, and they were called “the bruised and bleeding rabbis.” That’s not the plan.

The real problem with pursuing spiritual growth through selective dismemberment is that it doesn’t work. The real problem is not my eye. And it’s not my hand. It’s my heart. My heart is the innermost, unseen core of my personhood. That’s the secret place of spontaneous thoughts, desires, and perceptions. That’s what needs to change. That’s what God wants to change. If I live for desire, I end up the slave of desire. That’s why the whole minimalist ethic of consent is not enough to build a life on. Desire always narrows.

If I want illicit gratification from this woman, I have to keep a thousand thoughts out of my mind. I have to forget she’s somebody’s daughter. I have to forget that if another man looked at one of my daughters like that, I would be really angry. If I want illicit gratification, I’d have to not think about my wife. Not think about my children. Not think about God. Desire will do this to me. Desire keeps a thousand thoughts out of my head.

Now, the will (that’s your kingdom) is quite different from desire. The will often seeks options. The will always looks for the largest perspective. Desire wants to enslave the will, and apart from God’s help, it’ll do it. Gang, here’s the good news: There is freedom. When we come into the light in the area of sexuality, there is freedom.

I want to say this as tenderly as I know how. Some of you reading this dread this topic because you’re carrying guilt or shame or a boatload of regret. There is freedom, grace, and healing for anybody who will honestly come to God and step into the light.

We all need help on this. I want to tell you that I, too, am someone who needs God’s help to honor him.

I have a friend I’ve known and trusted for a long time who I talk with about my sexuality. When I travel, I let him know. I ask him to hold me accountable. I text him whenever I feel like I need prayer. We talk almost every morning early in the morning, and very often, it includes talking about this area of life. For a long time, I tried to struggle with sexuality just on my own or just God and me, until I was humbled enough to realize I needed help.

You have to humble yourself enough to tell somebody else, “I want you to hold me accountable. I want you to know where I’m tempted. I want you to know me with no secrets.” Whatever is going on in your life, I want you to know there is healing, there is hope, there is help. When you get to the end of your life, you can look back at a history of sexual struggle, hiddenness, constant temptation, guilt, and shame. You can try to go

it alone. You can limp back and forth between giving in, followed by guilt and then prayer, and then giving in again. You can keep your secrets in a dark place. You can have your ability to pray and worship God constantly impeded. You can put your relationships at risk. You can put your family at risk. You can put your integrity at risk.

But there is another way.

In the church, we often get it wrong, but Jesus never does. Philip Yancey begins what is maybe his most prized book with the story of a prostitute who puts her young daughter at risk. Filled with shame, she is desperate for help. When asked if she ever thinks about going to church, she replies: “Why would I go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. That would just make me feel worse.”

The irony is that few religions have made people feel worse about themselves because of sexual regret than Christianity. But perhaps no one was more a magnet for the sexually scandalized themselves than its founder. The worse people felt about themselves, the more likely they were to flock to Jesus. “The more I thought about this,” Philip writes, “the more I felt drawn to one word as the key. Grace.” It is, he says, the last, best word. And it is still available. There is no regret it cannot forgive, no heart it cannot strengthen, no person it cannot include.³

Chapter 7 - When Happily Isn't Ever After

DIVORCE

Maybe you're struggling in your marriage and not sure what you want to hear about marriage and divorce! Maybe you grew up in a family that experienced divorce, and you still feel the sadness. Maybe you've suffered the pain of divorce. Maybe for you, divorce was almost like the unforgivable sin, and you feel like damaged goods.

As we continue learning together from the Sermon on the Mount, we look at a passage now where Jesus redefines what makes someone a good person. He started with anger, and then he moved on to sexuality, and now we move on to marriage and divorce. I'll warn you at the outset: these words of Jesus seem weird and harsh. Here's what Jesus said:

“It has been said, Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

This raises lots of questions. “But I thought adultery was having an affair with a married person, so why would getting a divorce from my wife make her a victim of adultery? And if I marry a woman who has been divorced, which would mean she's single now, how would that make me an adulterer?”

So, it's helpful to remember Jesus is a really smart guy. He did not say things without a good reason, so we'll walk through his comments one step at a time.

First, in particular, we notice that Jesus is a man. Mostly, the Sermon on the Mount is delivered to men and women, but we saw in pondering sexuality, and now, in discussing marriage and divorce, he specifically talks to men for a very good reason.

In that day, it appears that pretty much only men had the power to get a divorce. In the ancient world, particularly for women, a husband could divorce his wife at any time for any reason merely by walking out of the house. The woman would find herself stuck with the kids and with no money. In the unlikely event that you ever got money (maybe your sons would grow up and make the farm profitable-or you'd go to Nineveh and win at blackjack or something), your original husband could return at any time and reclaim that wife and the money and the household. What that meant for that woman was that no other man would marry her if husband number one could come back and claim her and any money. In other words, if you were a woman and your marriage ended in the ancient world, you were in deep, deep trouble.

The law of Moses recorded in the Old Testament when compared to ancient Near East customs, was striking in its concern for women. Moses put it like this: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house... ”That’s from the book of Deuteronomy (24:1).

This certificate was actually a way of protecting a woman in the ancient world. It meant that her first husband could not come back and claim her. On the certificate of divorce (a lot of them have been found by archaeologists), it would actually say, “You are free to remarry any Jewish man you wish.”

So, in the Sermon on the Mount, here’s what Jesus is basically saying: “You know, friends, you’ve all been dividing up the sheep and the goats like this.” The bad guys are the guys who divorce their wives by just walking out and don’t give them a certificate of divorce to protect them. You’ve been thinking, ‘Marriage exists for my fulfillment. I’m free to divorce any time I feel like it. All my options are open. As long as I give her a certificate of divorce, then I am righteous in God’s eyes.’”

In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has not been giving laws about anger or adultery or oaths. Instead, he’s been describing the way a person who has surpassing righteousness-true God-given inner goodness, would think and feel and act. Even in our day, divorce is usually disproportionately hard on women. In that culture, it was much worse. Unless the woman had a rich relative who would take her in as a quasi-servant (and that was unlikely), she basically had two choices: She could marry another man who would receive her as damaged goods, often as one of multiple wives, or she could become a prostitute. Either way, she would be living in a sexually-degraded pain-of adultery condition.

Jesus is saying that a kingdom kind of husband will recognize that, and that kind of man will be more concerned about the well-being of his wife than he will be with himself. A man who’s living in the Kingdom of God will reject the “Keep your options open and look for a spouse upgrade” culture and seek his wife’s well-being above his own. He will, above all, will the good for his wife.

Here again, Jesus is not giving laws; he’s describing true surpassing goodness. But I know, I know, I know. For many people, the question of “Is divorce ever permissible, and if so, when from a biblical standpoint?” is a huge one. So, let’s look at what rabbis in Jesus’ day taught about divorce and then consider what else Jesus says. We’ve already seen that Deuteronomy mentions divorce on the grounds of indecency. In the Hebrew language, that was on the grounds of sexual immorality.¹ So that was one reason for divorce where there would be permission to remarry.

But then we wonder, “What about other cases? What about when there was abuse or abandonment?” Those cases were covered in the Old Testament as well in a roundabout way in Exodus, Chapter 21. The law talks about what happens if a man takes a second wife, which would happen in the ancient world. This passage is designed to protect the rights of the first wife. It says, “If he takes another wife to himself he shall not diminish her [the first wife's] food, her clothing, or her conjugal love. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is free to go without payment of money.” Once again, the ancient laws were seeking to protect women. In the ancient world, when a husband took on a new wife, the second wife tended to get the good stuff. The law said he made a vow when he married his first wife to provide support, food and clothing, and love. If he breaks that vow, she's free to leave, to get a divorce, and that would mean getting a certificate and being able to remarry.

Over time, rabbis looked at these two passages, the one in Deuteronomy and the one in Exodus, and said, “Here's the overarching principle involved. Marriage is a vow that covers three areas: fidelity (that means no sexual unfaithfulness), provision, and love (that means sexual intimacy and affection). Where these vows are broken, the victim of the broken vows has the right to get divorced and remarry.” Rabbis would debate what constituted breaking these vows: how much food, what kind of clothing. They would also make rules about conjugal love.

Rabbis said a husband had to offer to be intimate with his wife twice a week, or she could divorce him (This is from the ancient rabbinic world). Or rabbis sometimes would teach that once a week was acceptable if he was a donkey driver. (It's kind of like a trucker who's on the road a lot.) Or if the husband was unemployed, he had to offer every night or she could divorce him. (I'm not making this up!) Did rabbis believe there could be biblical grounds for divorce around abandonment or abuse? Of course they did. Abandonment was an extreme form of breaking the vow to provide. Abuse was an extreme form of breaking the vow to love.

So that was the rabbinic framework for understanding marriage and divorce and remarriage.

In Jesus' day, there was a completely new development. Two of the most famous rabbis who lived a few decades before Jesus were named Hillel and Shammai. Rabbi Hillel had a new interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1. He claimed that it said a man could divorce his wife for a cause of indecency, and that really meant any cause at all. Rabbis in Hillel's school decided that this any cause divorce was available only to men and “any cause” covered any fault you could conceive of. They even wrote down different potential ones.

Rabbis listed things like if she spoiled his dinner, if she walked around with her hair

unbound, if she argued in a voice loud enough to be heard next door. This was a new kind of divorce in Jesus' day: the any-cause divorce. One drawback to any-cause divorce was it was more expensive. If you could prove that your wife was guilty of breaking a vow, like adultery, then you did not have to pay back what was called the ketubah, the marriage inheritance promised at a wedding. However, if you did the any-cause divorce—just divorce her because you didn't like her cooking or something, then the husband had to pay back this price.

So Hillel is saying there's now a new divorce option that's available to Israel: the any-cause divorce.

Very soon, that kind of divorce for any cause at all was the most popular, and you may know of a case in the Bible where it was actually considered. When Joseph found out that his fiancee Mary was pregnant, we're told, "Because Joseph... did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly."

In that day, even when you were engaged, to break off the relationship required a divorce. When the text says he thought about doing it quietly, that's not a vague adjective. It was a technical term. It meant he would not call her an adulterer in court; instead, he would get an any-cause divorce. That meant he would pay the price. He would support the child. So, any-cause divorce is based on this interpretation from Rabbi Hillel that says Deuteronomy allowed you to divorce your wife for basically any cause.

However, Rabbi Shammai and his followers disagreed. They said, "No, no. That passage in Deuteronomy refers only to sexual immorality," so only breaking that vow or the vows of provision and love from Exodus 21 were legal grounds for divorce. They said that any-cause divorce was wrong. In Jesus' day, this was a big debate. We're told on one occasion, some Pharisees came to Jesus to test him or trap him. They asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?" When they did this, they were not asking Jesus, "Rabbi, is divorce always against the law?" That was not debated. Divorce is in Moses' law. It was done in the case of vow-breaking. No rabbi would ask, "Is it lawful for us to follow Moses' law?" What they're asking Jesus here is, "How do you interpret Deuteronomy 24:1? Are you a Hillel guy or a Shammai guy?" The Pharisees already know that Jesus rejects the "any cause" school—that you can just divorce your wife for any reason at all. He has already talked about that. They know he's a Shammai guy on this one.

Here's why it's a trap. You might know that the ruler of Galilee at that time was a man by the name of Herod. While Herod was married to his first wife, he fell in love with a woman named Herodias. Herodias was also married to Herod's brother. So Herod

divorced his first wife with an any-cause divorce, he had Herodias divorce her husband-his brother, and then he married her, his sister-in-law.

John the Baptist talked about this. We're told in Matthew 14:4 that John the Baptist courageously said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have her. This any-cause divorce wasn't valid." And you might remember what happened to John the Baptist. Herod cut off his head. Now Herod is looking for Jesus.

When Jesus says, "John was right; any-cause divorces are wrong," guess who is the first person those religious leaders will make sure hears about this? That would be Herod. So Jesus responds: "Haven't you read... that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate"

(Matthew 19:4)

Jesus is taking marriage back to Genesis, and this is loaded. If you look at what God does in Genesis, he separates and then joins together. He separates light from darkness and puts them together to make a day. He separates the sky from the earth and puts them together to make our environment. He separates the dry land from the seas and puts them together to make our planet. Creation is God separating and then joining to defeat chaos and make shalom. Then he creates man, and he makes a woman... Do you remember what he makes her from? The rib. People wonder, "That seems a little unscientific." Well, there's an Old Testament scholar named John Walton who writes brilliantly about this. That word rib is better translated side, and you'll see that notation in footnotes in newer translations. In other words, the writer is not describing the process of the physical construction of the woman's skeleton. It's not like God is using Legos or something.²

The writer is naming God's intent about the nature of man and woman in marriage. They are created with equal worth, to stand side by side. Separate but then one. Side by side. God separates day from night, God separates sky from land, God separates sea from land, and now male and female are made to be separate so they can be joined together, and the two shall become one flesh. This is new creation, new shalom, oneness of heart and will and servanthood, like Father, Son, and Spirit are one. What a beautiful passage!

What this means, Jesus is saying, is divorce is undoing creation. It is unraveling shalom. That is why Jesus says, "What God has joined together, let no one separate." That's why the Bible is so serious, so severe about divorce.

If you're feeling a little heavy right now, if this feels a little weighty to you, if you've been through this pain, I want you to imagine how the disciples felt when they heard

Jesus' teaching on this subject. When he got done, their response was this: "The disciples said to him, 'If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry. In other words, "If I'm just going to be stuck with her, who in their right mind would do that?" The Pharisees are sure Jesus can't be right, so they ask another question.

"Why then, ' they asked, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" They're referring to that Deuteronomy 24 passage. "Jesus replied, Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. "Jesus is getting to the real issue when it comes to grounds for divorce. As we have seen repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount, it addresses the heart, not just behavioral compliance. The problem that necessitates the tragedy of divorce is the ultimate problem of the human condition: hard-heartedness. Jesus didn't say, "Moses commanded you to get divorced." He says, "He permitted it because of hard-heartedness."

In our day, the most common reason given for divorce is incompatibility, but Jesus did not say, "Because of incompatibility, Moses said, 'Give the woman a certificate of divorce.'" G.K. Chesterton, a great Christian thinker and writer, wrote, "I have known many happy marriages, but never a compatible one.

The whole aim of marriage is to fight through and survive the instant when incompatibility becomes unquestionable. For a man and a woman, as such, are incompatible." He wrote that marriage is an adventure, "like going to war," and that "the whole pleasure of marriage consists in the fact that it constitutes a state of perpetual crisis."³

There may be a breaking of core marriage vows. Even that is not mechanical or legalistic grounds for divorce. If your spouse breaks a vow but then is repentant and softhearted, then rebuild the marriage. If your spouse refuses to repent, if there is a stubborn, defiant, continued decision to reject reconciliation, to refuse counsel, if there's continued rejection of physical intimacy, a willful continuation of patterns of deceit, abandonment, stealing, cruelty, then divorce may be the only option.

A few other thoughts on this topic: if you're married, grow your marriage. Don't take it for granted. Know details about your spouse's day. Serve your spouse. Cheer your spouse on. Work at your marriage. One of the biggest predictors of divorce is when communication constantly has barbs in it. "Could you help your fatherless son with his homework?"

At one point in time, Nancy and I were involved with a ministry called Great Dates. To see many couples building their marriages was just thrilling. We talked really openly about our own marriage. I have to tell you, our marriage is very imperfect, but being

married to Nancy is the greatest human gift I have. She is my number-one fan; she is my number-one critic. If you think those two don't go together, you do not know what it is to be loved by somebody who cherishes your growth into your best self. When Nancy is in fan mode, cheering me on, encouraging me, affirming me, praising me, believing in me, I really love it. When she's in critic mode, challenging me, confronting me, getting in my face and on my back, I really love it-mostly. Sometimes. If you're married, your assignment is to ask your spouse today, "How are we doing.. .really?" and then listen without getting defensive.

There are people who take their business and their career and their finances and their health really seriously, and they never think about their marriage. Every marriage can grow because every person can grow. If your marriage is hard (and Nancy and I have known those seasons), seek wise counsel, pray, read, ask friends for prayer, get help, get support.

I asked Nancy a while ago what the best day of her life had ever been. I knew the answer ahead of time; I knew she would say it was the day she married me.

.. .That was not her answer. When Nancy was a little girl, there was a lot of fighting in her home. Sometimes, she would hide the car keys so her mom or dad couldn't drive off in anger. Then, one day (when she was still a little girl), her daddy moved out and she had to shuttle back and forth. Creation unraveled for her. After a year of this, they surprised her by taking her out for dinner and asking her, "How would you like it if Daddy moved back in and Mommy and Daddy and you all lived together like a family again?" That was her best day.

Next were the births of our three children. And after that was the day we left Chicago and moved back to California. But don't worry, I'm not long after that!

You might be working on a marriage that is hard right now. It's worth the work. You may have been through the pain of divorce. There are some circles where there's this kind of separation: married people are good, divorced people are bad. That's precisely the kind of superficial approach to who's good and who's not that Jesus is refuting in the Sermon on the Mount.

Who do you think is the most spiritually significant divorced person in the Bible? I would have said maybe the Samaritan woman at the well. You might know her story. She'd been through five husbands and was now living with a guy she wasn't married to. Jesus honors her with his longest conversation with anybody in the Bible. She became the first preacher to tell about Jesus and saved her whole town.

But there's an even more prominent divorced person than that.

The main picture God used to describe his relationship with his people was a covenant, like a marriage. Israel was like his bride. Then God makes this statement in Jeremiah 3:8: "I gave faithless Israel her certificate of divorce and sent her away because of all her adulteries. " That's God. God knows the humiliation of rejection and the pain of betrayal from hard-hearted people like me. Through the prophet Jeremiah, we learn God is a divorcee.

So, God invented the first divorce recovery program. It's at a place called Calvary.

The price for the course is one bloodstained cross-and Jesus paid it. He was the first to go through the program, and it's still in session.

The deep reality is we are all implicit in this divorce God is talking about. We have all been unfaithful to God; that's why any church that divides people into non-divorced first-class Christians and divorced second-class Christians gets it wrong. On the most important spiritual level, we have all been unfaithful.

We all need the cross.

Healing is possible. Marriage is possible. Forgiveness is possible. Because grace is possible.

So whatever you do, don't miss grace.

Chapter 8 - I Have A Spin Problem

When Do You think Children First Think It Is OK to Lie?

The old answer was, “When they can talk.” Actually, it turns out to be earlier than that. No kidding! There was a study done at the University of the Sacred Heart in Tokyo. Babies who cannot even talk yet learn to cry when they are not distressed, just because it will fake their parents out into giving them the attention they want.¹ When you fall for that, when you come and hug them, they are laughing at you in their little 6-month-old psychopathic souls.

Where do those little people learn how to lie? Well, they learn it from big people. The most famous study on deception in our day found that the majority of adults lie two to three times in a 10-minute conversation. Lying is found in every culture in the world. We lie about our motives. We lie about why we’re late. We lie about what we really said. We cheat on our taxes, our expense accounts, and our resumes. We lie to our spouses. We lie to our children. We lie to our bosses. We lie in the games we play! “What did you get on that hole?” “Put me down for a five.” That’s such interesting language, isn’t it? “Put me down for a five. I really got a six, but that number makes me feel bad. I’d feel great about a four, but that’s too big a lie. Then I’d have to admit I was a big, fat liar. Five will be a Goldilocks lie: not too big, not too little, just right.”

That’s the human condition. We want to speak the truth, but we’re prepared to lie if we think it’s necessary, like the little Sunday school girl who said, “A lie is an abomination unto the Lord and a very present help in time of trouble.”

We lie to get stuff. We lie to sell stuff. We lie to impress people. We lie to get out of trouble.

Throughout our culture, whether in politics, the media, or the rise of fake news and fact-checkers, spin is such a problem that a few years ago, the Oxford Dictionary Word of the Year was post-truth. One researcher said the number one finding in surveying people about lying is people lie about how much they lie.

Now, God knows all about this. Every lie we ever tell is as ridiculous to God as that little kid with the sprinkles all over his face saying he never ate the sprinkles. “Hey, Adam. What have you been eating?” “Nothing. It’s the woman. It’s the Serpent.”

Early in Jesus’ ministry we’re told Jesus did not trust people because he knew all about them. He knew what was in every human heart. In other words, you can fool some of the people all the time. You can fool all the people some of the time. You can never fool Jesus. Anytime anybody lies, to God, we’re the kid with the sprinkles.

Now, Jesus talks about our words and truth-telling in the Sermon on the Mount. It's very interesting. When he talked about anger, he began with the Ten Commandments. "You shall not murder." It's the same thing with sexuality. "You shall not commit adultery." "We'd expect with truth-telling, he'd go back again to the Ten Commandments ("You shall not bear false witness... but he doesn't. He begins actually in such a different place that this is really the least talked about teaching in the whole Sermon on the Mount. Here's what he said:

"Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.' But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

We read those words and wonder, "Why in the world does Jesus care about people swearing by heaven?" You might be thinking, "I never swear by heaven, earth, Jerusalem, or my head, so I'm doing great on this teaching." Sometimes, people have taken Jesus' teaching here mechanically or literally as a rule against ever taking an oath. They will not go into the military, testify in court, or do anything that requires oath-taking.

That is not Jesus' concern. Remember, he is showing us in this part of the Sermon on the Mount what true inner goodness, surpassing righteousness, looks like and contrasting that with conventional interpretations of goodness and the law back in Israel's day.

To understand his concern here, let's go back to little kids again.

We all lie. Children lie. So what do I do when I have to make sure you believe me? Because if you don't believe me, I might not get you to do what I want you to do, and I have to get you to do what I want you to do. Little kids invented something called a promise. "I promise I'm telling you the truth this time." Then, we'll add variations to convince others of our sincerity. "Cross my heart and hope to die. Stick a needle in my eye." You have to believe me now because if you don't, I'll be dead in a coffin with a needle in my eye, and it will be your fault for not believing me.

Every culture has lying. That's why every culture has oaths or promises. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount, said oaths give evidence of lying. Now, an oath generally invokes something sacred. In the ancient world, "May the gods deal with me severely if I am not telling you the truth." We still hear people say

something like, “I swear by my mother’s grave,” “I swear by all that’s holy,” or, “I swear on a stack of Bibles.”

Oaths were around in the ancient world. Israel was taught to make oaths in the name of the one true God. From Deuteronomy. “Fear the Lord your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name. ”Often, they would acknowledge God’s presence with their body by raising their hand. This is from the Old Testament. “But Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth...

To this day, if you go into a courtroom, you will often be asked to put your hand on a Bible, raise your right hand, and solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God. In Jesus’ day, a devout Jewish person would often refrain from using the name of God as a sign of devotion. They didn’t want to misuse that sacred name. They would substitute and make their oath by heaven or by Jerusalem, but it’s the same idea.

Okay, that’s the backdrop. Jesus goes to the heart of the problem with the oath system. The problem is we don’t tell the truth. We end up using pressure, guilt, or a song and dance to impress other people with our sincerity and get them to respond the way that we want. “I promise. I promise! I promise.”

Two of our kids were in the backseat when they were quite young. There was a slapping sound, and the little one started crying. The older one knew she was in trouble, so she promised she was not the slapper. I was thinking, “What am I supposed to believe here... .that the baby slapped herself?” The older one got so worked up defending her innocence that she had tears in her eyes. She said in a trembling voice, “Daddy, you don’t think I’d lie to you, do you?” I started to feel so guilty. How could I think that? Then I realized what was going on, and I said, “Yes, I do! Mostly you’re telling the truth, but you can be a little liar.” Nancy said, “Man, she has been getting me with that one forever! I’m so glad you said that.” I said to Nancy, “Well, don’t be too happy. You can be a little liar, too!” Nancy said, “You can lie worse than I can!” We had a really excellent, productive conversation.

Jesus understood that we resort to oaths (“I swear. I promise. It’s the gospel truth.”) because we’re desperate to get the other person to believe what we want them to believe, so they will do what we want them to do. Therefore, instead of saying, “Here’s the information. You have the freedom to decide,” we try to pressure or manipulate or override their judgment.

So, swearing an oath here is just one example of what in our day is sometimes called a song and dance or being a spin doctor. The Old Testament condemned lying by the use

of oaths. In the ancient world, oaths were like training wheels for truth-telling. “Swear by the one true God.” But people would turn that into legalism and say, “Well, as long as you keep your oath, you’re righteous.” So, you got a little leeway on non-oath statements.

But now that the kingdom of God has come in a unique way through Jesus, it’s time to take the training wheels off. So now, with my words, I am to honor your will—that’s your kingdom. I don’t try to pressure you. I don’t deceive you. I don’t manipulate you. It’s just simply, “Yes, it’s like this. Nope, it’s like that” I honor your capacity to decide because I love you more than I want to get my way. You can tell somebody the truth without loving them, but you cannot love somebody without telling them the truth. Dallas wrote, “Kingdom rightness respects the soul need of human beings to make their judgments and decisions solely from what they have concluded is best.” I read once that the secret to truth-telling is to decide ahead of time to tell the truth, no matter what. But actually, that’s not quite the secret. The secret lies far deeper than that, and we’ll come to the secret.

For now, let’s look at how that played out in an actual character in the Bible. By the way, if you’re feeling any guilt or shame on this subject, you might actually be encouraged to know that the Bible is full of liars: Adam, Eve, Cain, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Aaron, Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, Rachel, David, Samson, Herod, Ananias, Sapphira.

Maybe the most spectacular lie in the Bible (like the Mount Everest of lies) came from the man on whom Jesus said he was going to build his church. The night before Jesus died, he warned the disciples they would all disown him.

We’re told in Matthew 26:31-35, “Peter replied, ‘Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.’ ” Jesus pushed back. “... this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.’ But Peter declared, ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.’ ”

Now, do you think Peter was sincere when he said that? I sure do! I think at that moment, he was deeply stirred emotionally. I’ll bet you he had tears in his eyes as he pictured himself being a martyr for Jesus because we get that way. We’re so convinced of our sincerity. He predetermined he would tell the truth no matter what. Let’s see how well that works.

A few hours later, Jesus is on trial to be crucified. Peter is sitting in the courtyard. He is as close to Jesus as he dares to get. A servant girl sees him and claims Peter had been with Jesus. “But he denied it before them all. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ ” Notice he doesn’t say, “I never followed Jesus.” The lie isn’t that blunt. He says, “I

don't know what you're talking about." Maybe he convinces himself that's true. "I'm not really sure what she is saying."

When we get good at lying, we rationalize it in the moment. We could actually get offended when somebody accuses us of lying even though deep down inside, we are lying. How did Peter go from "I'm ready to die" to "I'm ready to lie"? Well, the only foundation for truth-telling is that I die to myself so that I can live in the care of God. If I believe I have to watch out for myself, I will keep lying as a useful tool that might be necessary. Only if I trust that there is a greater reality (the Kingdom of God) will I be able to let that go. So we might start with really small things. This is kind of embarrassing, but I mentioned golf earlier. I was playing golf not long ago. I was playing very badly. The numbers on the card were making me feel bad about myself. Then I remembered that basic prayer of life: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth..." I literally started praying that prayer with every shot. I know it sounds goofy, but that's where I live. I'm a goofy person. At one point, I was hitting over a water hazard, and I hit a ball over the water. I just prayed, "Your will be done." I hit a second ball into the water. "Your will be done." I hit a third ball in a row into the water. "Really, God? That's your will? Seriously?"

I know it's trivial; why would I be attached to a number in a game I'm not even good at? Here's the thing about sin: Sin is trivial. Sin is mostly about immensely trivial desires. Our emotions get attached to embarrassingly trivial achievements, appearances, or getting our way about stuff we know doesn't matter.

Being on a golf course and thinking, "Even if I get an octuple-bogey, Jesus still loves me," allows me to let go of shame, hiding, and deceit. It's a reminder that I can die to myself and my score. There is actually freedom and grace in the kingdom. "Oh God, your kingdom come." That's what Peter is learning; it's in all the moments we're tempted to deceive that we discover where we have not yet died to self. Death to self, not the determination, is the only foundation for truth. This is what Peter is learning. He lies, and there's this encounter. We're told, "Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, 'This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.'" Now, Peter's body reflects what's happening in his soul. He leaves the courtyard to go outside to get farther away from Jesus because he knows if he is too close, he is likely going to have to answer the question.

Much research indicates how our bodies tend to betray our lies. When people lie, they tend to cover their mouths. They might cough. They might cover up their core. They might look in a different direction. Lying fractures, disintegrates the soul. "[Peter] denied it again, with an oath: 'I don't know the man!'" He could not get them to believe him the first time, and he has to get them to believe him because otherwise he might be

in trouble. So this time, he takes an oath. “I promise.” We don’t know what form the oath took. By heaven, maybe. By Jerusalem. Maybe, “As God is my witness, cross my heart and hope to die.”

This time, the lie is more direct. This time, it’s not, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” This time, it’s, “I don’t know the man.” Lying works that way. It’s easier to go bigger the second time. Even here, Peter cannot bring himself to say the name Jesus. “I don’t know the man!” As though he is not even sure of the man’s name. When I sin against you, I will avoid saying your name because I do not want to think of you as a person with your own kingdom. The deceptive soul is a divided soul.

Back to the text. “After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, ‘Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.’” Peter, like Jesus, was from Galilee. People from Galilee (which was in the north) had an accent.

Accents are often associated with different status levels. A hillbilly accent is considered low. Any speaker with a British accent automatically gets 15 bonus IQ points. Did you ever notice that? The highest-status accent in our day is a Swedish accent. That’s why Nobel Prizes come from Sweden.

To natives of the big city of Jerusalem, Galileans were hicks. They were rednecks. “Your accent gives you away.” “You’re a hillbilly, like him.” The noose is tightening. Peter is a cornered rat. “Then [Peter] began to call down curses, and he swore to them, ‘I don’t know the man!’” Now is he cursing? Maybe himself. “May God strike me dead if I’m not telling the truth.” He knows he is not telling the truth, so what does that say about his faith in God?

Maybe its, “God curse you. God damn you. What’s the matter with you? Why won’t you believe me? Why don’t you leave me alone? I swear on all that’s sacred. I promise on a stack of Bibles. I don’t know him, don’t love him, didn’t follow him.” This is hard to believe, but the grammar of the passage suggests Peter is actually cursing Jesus. “God curse him. God strike him. I don’t know him!” We see that Peter has one god now: his own skin.

When we lie, we don’t become atheists; we just change altars. A rooster crows. “Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: ‘Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times. Then, this very devastating line: ‘And he went outside and wept bitterly. “Now, he is as far away from Jesus outside as he can get. Lying will do that.

Maybe he remembered so long ago when he heard his Teacher saying, “Again, you have heard that it was said... ‘Do not break your oath... ‘But I tell you, do not swear an oath at

all... All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. " He is a broken, sobbing wreck.

But that's not the end! I have to tell you something just amazing. There is something revolutionary, otherworldly going on in this story.

This is so beautiful.

There's a classicist scholar by the name of Erich Auerbach. He wrote that this story of Peter and his tears could not have been found in other ancient literature in the ancient world. Peter is not a king. He is not a soldier. In the ancient world, he was not a subject who would have been considered worthy of a well-bred person's sympathy.

What Auerbach writes is so amazing. "A scene like Peter's denial fits into no antique genre. It is too serious for comedy, too contemporary and everyday for tragedy, politically too insignificant for history. [...] It portrays something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity ever set out to portray: the birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people..."²²

It is this strange new world where the tears of a backwoods fisherman are the occasion for the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God that leaves Pontius Pilate and Herod the Great as bit players on the ash heap of history. It is the Beatitudes come to life! "Blessed are those who mourn... "It's the upside-down kingdom in an inside-out world.

There's a tradition that for the rest of his life if Peter was speaking and somebody in the crowd wanted to embarrass him, they would crow like a rooster. It was precisely in his greatest failure that he received the greatest grace.

After Jesus was crucified, when the women went to Jesus' tomb, and an angel told them Jesus had risen, this is what the angel said: "But go, tell his disciples and Peter... "

Why did the angel say, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter..."? "Hey, Peter, you big, fat liar. You are not done. There's enough grace in the cross for you."

Jesus promises that when we live in the freedom of death to self and in the power of the forgiveness of the cross, we will receive a new strength we could never generate on our own. Then, all of the sudden, we're not living in our own power. It's so amazing.

On the golf course, when I started praying, "Thy will be done," I started playing better. I ended up shooting a 78 (... a 92)! Anyway, it's so interesting it was Peter who would write, "Therefore, rid yourselves of all. ..deceit."

Focus on asking God to help you grow in love so you actually want to honor other people's kingdoms. You want them to be free, so this week, you give no song and dance. This week, no spin, no pressure, no manipulation, no "You have to believe me so I get what I want out of you."

Just let it be yes and no.

Trust God. Speak the truth. Die to self. Be free.

Living in the truth really works. Cross my heart.

Chapter 9 - Audience Of One

APPROVAL ADDICTION

We're learning from the greatest talk ever given in the history of the human race. Once a year, the president of the U.S. gives what's called a State of the Union Address. The Sermon on the Mount is what might be thought of as Jesus' "state of the universe" address. Dallas Willard said there are four great questions of life everybody has to grapple with, whether they want to or not. What is real? What is the good life? Who is a good person? and How do you become a good person?¹

Everybody has to answer those questions whether you want to or not. You just do it based on how you live. They are inescapable. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives his four answers to those great questions.

What is most real? What can you count on?

God and his kingdom, his reign, his will. Jesus says the foundation of existence is not (as widely thought in our day) a random universe, a giant, meaningless machine, quarks, or photons. It is a person, a personal God of immense power, wisdom, and love. That's why Jesus says seek first the Kingdom of God, because that's real.

What is the good life?

We all want to know. Jesus answers that in the Beatitudes. The good life, contrary to contemporary wisdom, is not wealth, IQ, attractiveness, thicker hair, whiter teeth. It is available to anybody who is in partnership with God in his kingdom. You, right there in your life, can be blessed.

Who is a good person?

Folks are really fuzzy on that one in our day. Jesus says a good person is someone who is pervaded by God's love and routinely wills the good for others. Not a rule-breaker, not a ruler-follower. That's why in the Sermon on the Mount, he often contrasts, "You have heard it said..." (behavioral compliance) with, "But I say to you..." (inner transformation).

How do you become a good person?

Well, you put your full confidence in this Jesus and become his disciple, his apprentice, his student. You seek with sincere intent and the help of God to creatively, powerfully obey him in all things. The reason the Sermon on the Mount is the most influential talk

in human history isn't that Jesus got lucky. It's not random. It is simply that no one else answers the four great questions of life in a way that brings anywhere near the guidance or wisdom Jesus' answers have for 2,000 years, and his own life manifested that wisdom in a way that inspires people 2,000 years later.

In the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew, Chapter 6, where Jesus is warning against a common mistake people make in terms of how they pursue the good life and how they try to look like a good person, here's what Jesus says: "Be careful not to perform your righteous acts before men to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. "Now, the condition Jesus addresses here is what, in our day, we might discuss as approval addiction. It's to live in bondage to what other people think of me, to make my life a performance to be seen by them, the disease to please.

In Matthew 6, Jesus talks about how, in that day, people would often do this by showing others how much they were giving, how much they were praying, or how much they were fasting. In his day, often you could pursue status by flaunting how devout you were. We live in a much less religious culture, so we tend to seek people's approval in other ways. But the underlying temptation is still there to try to live for other people's opinions of me rather than who I actually am. We can take something good (It could be giving, praying, fasting. It could be our grades. It could be our work. It could be our body. It could be our family) and use that to win approval and feed our own ego. I don't even know how much of a mess I am when I'm doing it! That's the danger of it. Anytime you're trying to win somebody's approval, you cannot acknowledge you're trying to win their approval because nobody will give you approval if they think you're an approval-junkie.

In Matthew 6, people are giving, praying, or fasting because they want to impress others, but they have to pretend like they're doing it because they love God so much. That's why Jesus calls this hypocrisy. It gets into all of us. It gets into churches. It gets into everybody. We're all trying to deceive other people. We all do this. We deceive ourselves.

So... I want to describe what approval addiction really is. I want to talk about what the alternative to it is. I want to look at the consequences. If you live as an approval addict, what can you expect? Then, I want to look at what Jesus says about two great antidotes that take us in another direction.

Approval addiction.

An author named Mitch Prinstein has written a fascinating book called Popular. It's just called Popular. He says when you went into high school, chemical changes were going

on in your brain that made popularity the most urgent priority in your life. Those changes have stuck with you ever since high school.²

It turns out that sometimes the most popular kid (the head cheerleader or the captain of the football team) is miserable. It turns out that being popular doesn't necessarily lead to being happy—the good life. Prinstein distinguishes between two kinds of popularity. The first one is status. Status is how you impress other people: if you're rich, if you're beautiful, if you're powerful, if you're famous, etc. This starts in high school.

In fact, he describes a high school student, Alexandra Cort. She is tall, attractive, impeccably dressed, very sure of herself. She is the queen of the inner ring at her school. Every student surveyed listed Alexandra Cort as the most popular girl in school. Do you want to guess who the most disliked girl in the school is? Ironically, it's Alexandra Cort. She is gossipy, mean, selfish, and exclusive.

The other kind of popularity is quite different. Prinstein uses the word likability to describe this. That's defined in terms of being others-centered, what Jesus would talk about as love. Status seekers focus on themselves. Likable people (as Prinstein uses it) are focused on you. Status people talk about themselves, what they're doing, their lives. Likable people listen a lot. They're genuinely interested in your life.

When you're with a status-seeker, you kind of feel "less than," not really important. When you're with a likable person, you feel called to be your best self, like your life really matters.

It struck me reading through this that what Prinstein gives the label "likable" to (to be trustworthy, to genuinely care for other people, to will their good) really involves the same qualities Jesus describes with a word that sounds really churchy to us, which is righteous. To understand Jesus, we might actually translate Matthew 5:20 (a core statement in the Sermon on the Mount), "Unless your likability surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." We think of righteousness as a cliche, pious thing, but really, it's very much what Prinstein talks about as being a likable, caring, loving person.

The problem for people who suffer from approval addiction is you can never get enough. People who study this area say approval addicts end up engaging in what is sometimes called excessive reassurance seeking (I love this phrase!). They're always checking in with you to find out, "What did you think about this?" They're apologizing, or they're asking, "Do you like what I just did?" Underneath it, you feel manipulated because they're really just trying to use you to satisfy their own craving for approval.

Prinstein writes that for young people, social media can be highly addictive because our brains undergo changes that make us crave popularity—it's like a social rewards dispenser. You keep track of how many likes you get. You get a little surge of dopamine every time. This is amazing: YouTube currently has 13,000 tutorials on how to take the perfect selfie. There are 13,000 tutorials on how to take a picture of yourself for crying out loud! How many tutorials do you think there are on YouTube about how to die to your imperfect little selfie?

That would be zero.

Now, the alternative to approval addiction is simply this: to live before an audience of one. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish writer, talked about this idea of living as though I have an audience that consists only of God. What this recognizes is we're made to seek approval. We can't help ourselves. Think about a baby, for example. When they're loved, when they're noticed, when they're delighted in, they just beam.³

The question isn't... Will I seek approval? The question is... Where will I seek it? I have an infinite need for approval. That's part of being human. God has an infinite supply. Only God does.

Jesus said if you want to become a good person and live the good life, you enter into the Kingdom of God—what is most real—and you live before God. I live to please God. I live to be approved by God. I find my security in God's love. I find my identity in the image of God. I find my hope in the strength and power of God. I live for God's approval.

In fact, you cannot actually live for both human approval and divine approval. You have to choose which road. In Galatians 1:10, Paul said, "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. " I'd be pretending, performing, guessing, calculating.

In the gospel of John, we're talking about a certain group of people. The text says, "... for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God. " The apostle Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, and there's kind of a mess there. He says to them, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court. "

Here's a little phrase to take with you if you want to work on your approval addiction: "I don't care." Try it. Say it out loud. It's tremendously liberating!

This week, when some fashion expert doesn't approve of your clothes, say, "I don't care." When somebody who is an expert at interior decorating doesn't approve of your

decor, say, “I don’t care.” When the cool kids don’t approve of your taste in music, say, “I don’t care.” When a coworker doesn’t like your idea, say, “I don’t care.” When a law enforcement officer doesn’t like how fast you are driving, say, “I don’t...” Actually, we might want to take a little care of that one.

Now, this is important: When you bring “I don’t care” into your life, it doesn’t mean “I don’t care about you” It means, “I live for an audience of one, and you are not that one.” God is not calling you to win universal approval.

When I started working at a church, I remember having this weird thought: “Well, one good thing about working at a church is everybody will like me. Because if you work at a church, everybody has to like you, right?”

Of course, life is never that way. Not everybody is going to like you, so stop trying! You will never scratch that itch. Here’s the amazing thing. This is life in the Kingdom of God. Jesus likes me. Go figure!

Jesus goes on to name the consequence of the opposite (of performing to impress others, to do things to be seen by others). Here again, in that day, it was often religious. In our day, it might be working hard, athletics, or a variety of things to be seen by others. Jesus says—and this is profound, “If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

Now we see in Matthew 6 Jesus goes on to talk about a lot of rewards. Thoughtful people are often confused about this. They wonder, “Is Christianity a mercenary religion? Does it bribe people? Is it kind of immature?”

C.S. Lewis writes about rewards in ways I find very helpful. He says there are two categories of rewards, and they’re very different from each other. There are extrinsic rewards for something you do, and there are intrinsic rewards.⁴

An extrinsic reward has no natural connection to the activity or relationship; it’s kind of an add-on. It’s a prize—or maybe a bribe. An intrinsic reward is one that is naturally connected to what I am doing. Extrinsic versus intrinsic. Just to make sure the difference is clear, if you marry somebody because they are rich if you marry them just to get their money, will that be an intrinsic reward or an extrinsic reward? (You have a 50/50 shot.) That would be an extrinsic reward. You should not do that. Marrying someone for their money is not a good idea. If you marry them for love, because you’re in love, you get a real reward. You get to experience love, but that’s an intrinsic reward. That’s good. You should do that.

If you study for really high grades so other people will be impressed by your GPA, that’s

extrinsic. If you study for the joy of learning, for the wonder of being able to know and discover, and for intellectual enrichment, that's intrinsic. You ought to do that. That's good.

If you buy a Tesla because it has status, prestige, and will impress other people, that is extrinsic. That's bad. But if you buy it because it has speed, beauty, power, and you're going to give it to your favorite author as an expression of love and appreciation, that's good. You ought to do that!

The Bible has a lot to say about rewards. They are very important. We ought not to short shrift (19:37) them or be embarrassed by them; they are intrinsically connected to loving God and life in the kingdom. They are mostly about the person you will become. The Bible often uses physical imagery to describe these rewards as a way to convey spiritual reality that is beyond words.

For example, the Bible talks about music in heaven. The idea is not that we're going to be playing harps throughout all of eternity. Music expresses joy too deep for words. Biblical writers talk about saints reigning on thrones. The idea is not that we're going to sit on really plush, nice chairs. The idea is we will experience dominion, partnering together to be strong and creative in the service of the good. That's life in the kingdom. It talks about how the saints will throw their crowns before God. That doesn't mean we all have to wear these goofy little metal hats. It means we will experience wonder, admiration, and childlike humility in ways that will make us want to cry out with gladness.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "There is no need to be worried by facetious people who try to make the Christian hope of 'heaven' ridiculous by saying they do not want 'to spend eternity playing harps.' The answer to such people is that if they cannot understand books written for grownups, they should not talk about them. [...] People who take these symbols literally might as well think that when Christ told us to be like doves, he meant that we were to lay eggs."⁵

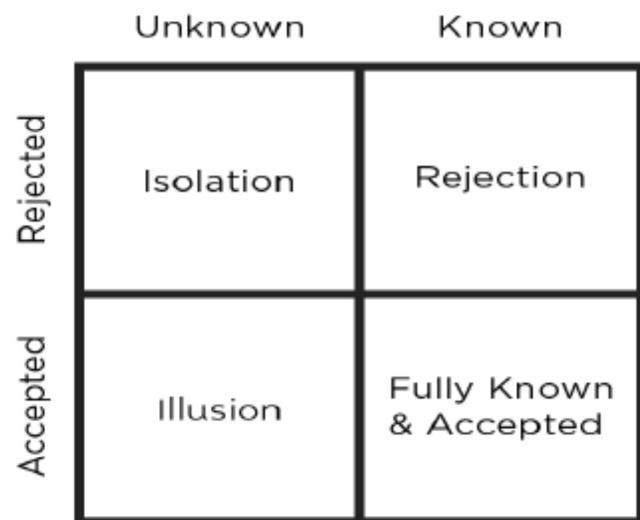
Jesus is not saying if you do good deeds and somebody else sees them, God says, "Well, I was going to give you extra jewels in your crown and a bigger mansion, but now other people have seen what you did, so I'm going to take that reward back." The reward Jesus is talking about is primarily the person you become. The idea is if you do these good things in secret, you will increasingly be freed from the tyranny of approval addiction.

You will have the peace that comes from knowing you're loved by God. You will have the security of not needing the approval of other people all the time. You will have the joy of being free to gladly help another human being without the constant need for their

approval. You can be happy even when somebody raises their eyebrow, even when somebody honks unfairly at you. But if you keep performing to impress other people by doing your righteous acts before others to be seen by them, then your reward will be that they will be impressed with you (maybe). God will allow you to have that. Of course, you will miss the transformation into a truly good person who can experience the good life, but it's not because God is saying, "Well, I'm going to take that away from you." You will have chosen another kind of reward that is incompatible with the peace and security that comes from knowing you are loved by God.

How do I know if I suffer from approval addiction? My life will tell me. A book called *Glittering Images* has been very helpful to me. It's part of a series of books about a pastor who, at one level, wants to serve God but then is trapped by his ego. The book contrasts people's outward appearance, their glittering image, with their true selves and all of their brokenness, hiddenness, and shame. The author, Susan Howatch, interestingly enough, was a romance novelist suffering in her marriage. She moved to England and lived across the road from a beautiful cathedral. There, in that transcendent beauty, she met Jesus. She began to write a different kind of book, an amazing series of books about a pastor who was tempted by glittering images. My parents bought me that book. My wife bought me that book. My friend, Rick, bought me that book. My sister, Barbie, bought me all six books in that series. Do not buy me another copy of that book. I get it. "My name is John. I am an approval-aholic. If you don't like me, I don't care. (Do you really not like me? Really?)

So, how do we get free of this approval addiction? Well, not by willpower! You might think about it like this: We're all made by God with two basic needs: the need to be accepted and the need to be deeply known. So we might be high on this or getting the opposite. We might be high on that or getting the opposite. You could think of this as a



little 2x2 matrix where we can be experiencing this and this or not.

Now, if I'm getting accepted, if I'm getting approval but I'm actually not known (I'm my false self), then this might be called illusion. This is exactly what was going on in Matthew, Chapter 6. People were pretending, "Look at me pray. Look at me give. Look at me fast." They were getting other people's approval, but they were not really known. This is really empty.

A church could become this. If nobody knows me and nobody accepts me, then I live in isolation. This is an epidemic in our day. In a day of social media and technology, the loss of community is ironic. The number of people who are living where they're not known and not accepted just keeps going up. If I'm known but I'm not accepted, then I experience rejection. This is so painful. I'll do anything to get out of here.

Interestingly, when the Bible talks about human beings at the beginning, it says about Adam and Eve, "And they were both naked... "That is, they were fully known. "...and were not ashamed. "They were deeply accepted.

When I was in high school, I think my sophomore year, I was 6 feet tall, and I weighed only 120 pounds. I'm Scandinavian, so my skin was about the color of a marshmallow. On one occasion, my high school group went to the beach, so I took off my shirt. That was a mistake.

I was only half-naked but fully and deeply ashamed. So I decided, "I'll just not let anybody see me again with my shirt off," until one day, there was a woman named Nancy. One day, I thought, "I can let her see me with my shirt off because she loves me, and I know it. She will not ridicule me, and I know it. We've been married now for ten years, and it's probably time that she sees me sooner or later."

It's a really interesting thing when we let a little of ourselves be known. You risk a little bit here, and then you wonder, "Which will it be? Will I be accepted or rejected?"

I've been learning a lot from AA and Twelve Steps. The first thing everybody says in meetings is, "I'm Dan. I'm an alcoholic." The first time somebody says that, it's a huge step. It feels vulnerable because people are prepared for rejection. But what actually happens in the meeting is everybody just says, "Hi, Dan." In other words, "This is a place where you're going to be accepted. We'll actually cheer on your vulnerability."

What I just described is love, and there's freedom there. There's power there. There's life there. It's the Kingdom of God and this is what Jesus wants for you.

This is where you become a truly good person.

Jesus gives his disciples two great practices to help with this. One of them is a little-

known spiritual discipline. They are both things that could be called practices or disciplines, and this one is the practice or the discipline of secrecy.

Actually, the first part of Matthew 6 is an invitation to this. Jesus says, “When you give, give in secret. When you pray, pray in secret. When you fast, fast in secret.” Now, again, this is often misunderstood. Jesus is not giving laws here. He is not saying, “Anytime you pray, never do it with other people; it always has to be done in secret.” He is giving a practice that will be helpful for you if you struggle with approval addiction.

Do something good, and don’t let anybody else know about it. At first, that sounds terrible. “Then I won’t get a reward for it!” But Jesus says, as you do that, you will discover you don’t need to impress other people in order to live a joyful life. You’ll actually begin to experience freedom because when you do that, your heavenly Father, who is unseen, sees what is done in secret. He will reward you, and you will become the kind of person who can live in love and joy.

Try it. Just practice secrecy. Do something good for somebody, and don’t let them know.

Do something good for somebody you don’t like, and don’t let them know.

That’s even more fun.

Write an anonymous note to encourage somebody. Do a favor. Clean up somebody’s yard. Get a gift card from a coffee shop and anonymously give it to somebody. Just do good things and don’t tell anybody. I challenge you to run an experiment and see if what Jesus said is true. You experience a little freedom and a little strength. That’s life in the kingdom.

Chapter 10 - Getting The Most Out Of Giving

GENEROSITY

Jesus invites us to step out of the slavery of what others think about us into being rooted and grounded in the love of our Heavenly Father. He gives a little known spiritual practice to help us: secrecy. That's when we refrain from making known our good deeds or impressive qualities. In secrecy, we hand over the PR department of our life to God. We learn we can refrain from trying to make people say, "Wow!" and still survive.

Here's what Jesus says when it comes to giving:

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

I have a running argument with a friend over whether or not Jesus was a funny man. I think he was. I think the reason it's not more obvious to us is that humor is very culture-bound. Movies that were funny only 50 years ago often aren't now. The Bible is 2,000 years old. How many 2,000-year-old documents are really funny?

Here, Jesus is giving a picture of what religious hypocrisy looks like. Imagine somebody goes to church. Its offering time. They pull out a trumpet and blow "Reveille" just before they put their money in the collection plate. James Martin says that would have been laugh-out-loud for Jesus' crowd. I've had times where I've done something that seemed generous, and then I tried to figure out how I could slip that into a conversation with somebody else so they would think I was generous, but impressing them was the farthest thing from my mind.

Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. "The idea here is, If you do something in order to impress somebody, your reward is impressing somebody. You'll get the "Wow!" and you'll be a little more addicted. It will be even harder to avoid doing the same thing the next time. You're a slave. He goes on. "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing..." Now, this is another funny line to an ancient crowd, and there's a profound idea behind it.

When something becomes deeply habitual to me, it's so embodied in me that I do it without thinking about it. We will say something becomes "second nature." When you were learning how to tie your shoes, initially, you had to concentrate really hard. The first time you did it, you were so proud. "Look at me!" It was trumpet-blowing time.

Now you can tie your shoes without thinking about it. You don't even want to blow a trumpet anymore. You're free to think about more interesting things. It's strange the way the body works. If you were to ask me, "How do I tie my shoelaces?" I'd have to think it through to try to describe it. "I cross the ends and make a loop, and so on." If you go home and tie your shoe, only this time make your left hand do what the right hand usually does. It's really hard. What Jesus is saying is a profound observation about the human condition in the kingdom of God. Let your generosity be as habitual as tying your shoes.

Let it become such a habit that your left hand does not know what your right hand is doing. Initially, when you begin to give, it will feel heroic. You will want to blow a trumpet. The first time you serve and are generous with your time, you may be tempted to tell people. "Nancy, come look! I've emptied the dishwasher without being asked! Blow the trumpets!"

Eventually, we can become generous or servants without thinking about how wonderful we are. We'll be free to think about more interesting things. Dallas Willard used to say one of the signs of spiritual maturity is the thoughts that no longer occur to you. Jesus' way of naming this is, "Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." The idea is not, "You were going to get a really big mansion if you kept something secret, but somebody found out, so God will downsize you." The idea is: As you give and become a generous person who's not just trying to impress other people, you do it in secret. Your reward is the kind of person you become, the life you lead, the joy you experience, the faith you build, and the divine care you receive.

I love the way Dr. Martin Luther King Jr expressed this in his sermon on 'The Drum Major Instinct': "Keep feeling the need for being first. But I want you to be the first in love. I want you to be the first in moral excellence. I want you to be the first in generosity."¹

The Bible is so full of rewards for being first in generosity that it is staggering. These, we are told, are some of those rewards:

1. Blessing.

Jesus himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Often, we turn the word blessed into a religious cliche, but as we've seen in the Sermon on the Mount, it's really about who has the good life. The idea is this: We think "getting stuff" is the path to the good life because when we get, we receive a little burst of pleasure. But that burst always wears off. Over the long haul, givers are happier, more joyful people than takers.

2. More relational connection.

We live in a society that's increasingly financially rich but relationally poor. Paul says to the givers in Corinth, "And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. "People who are generous with their time and money end up creating new relationships and connecting with and caring about more people. There's a fire department in Oregon that publicizes its fundraiser with a tee shirt that says, "You come to our breakfast; we'll come to your fire." If you're stingy with your time and your money, you will find other people to be stingy with their hearts. If you are generous with yours, their hearts will go out to you.

3. Freedom.

When I focus on my little life and getting what I want, I become a slave to my desire. There's a fascinating phrase that's used a couple of times in the Psalms. In Psalm 22, the psalmist says, "Deliver... my precious life from the power of the dogs. " Several verses later, the psalmist says, "Rescue me from the mouth of the lions. " When you hear that phrase, "my precious," you might remember The Lord of the Rings and the character, Gollum. The word golem actually comes from a Hebrew word that's used one time in the Bible in Psalm 139 for an unformed body. That little word, golem, became a character in Jewish folklore in the Middle Ages, representing someone who lived a grudging, robotic, resentful, soulless, enslaved kind of life.

That's why Tolkien chose that name Gollum. The ring, in Lord of the Rings, is what Professor Tom Shipley calls in a great phrase, a "psychic amplifier." It takes a desire and turns it into an obsession until it becomes an idol, and we become its slaves. The rule in the kingdom of God is, "Freely you have received; freely give. "What do I have that God did not give me? My body, my mind, my food, my clothes. Generosity liberates us to be able to give with the freedom we received.

4. Joy

In the Old Testament, we're told: "The people rejoiced over the offerings, for they had given freely and wholeheartedly to the Lord, and King David was filled with joy, " (I Chronicles 29:9).

When you are generous with your money or with your time in serving, it triggers the release of oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and prolactin. It's sometimes called the "helper's high." Stingy people secrete cortisol, which is the stress hormone. God has wired your body, so you literally cannot give without getting, just at the hormonal level.

5. God's delight.

Generosity takes us into the delight of God. "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done. " (Proverbs 9:17).

Your financial advisor might not tell you about this: You're going to die. No matter what happens. Why would you not give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose? Can you imagine standing in front of God one day and having God say, "Let's see. I have a bunch of IOUs here. Let's settle up"?

"Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward you... "

6. A blessing that will go to the next generation.

The psalmist says, "They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be a blessing of righteous people." It's fascinating that the text doesn't say, "Their children will be blessed." But, "Their children will be a blessing." We all know what a grasping spirit does to the next generation; just read through a little Shakespeare play called King Lear.

Selfish parents tend to raise selfish children. Generous parents tend to raise generous children. I remember taking one of our kids on a mission trip and watching her wash lice out of the hair of children in an under-resourced village and seeing her heart expand. What a gift to be able to build generosity into the next generation.

7. Multiplied impact.

One day, we're told, "Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others.'

This is fascinating on a number of levels. First, Jesus simply sits, openly watching people giving at offering time. That seems a bit nosey. What about the whole give in secret' thing?" Jesus seems to have this strange idea that people's giving is his business, that what people do with the resources that have come from God is God's business.

Here's the point: The widow was not giving to impress anybody. The widow was not hiring the trumpet player. The widow was betting everything on God. When Jesus said, "This poor widow put in more," he was not being metaphorical. He was not exaggerating. The spiritual dimension of our existence-our intentions, our choices, our character, is unseen, but it is real. That widow's mite became the most famous gift in the history of humanity. That widow literally has inspired the generosity of hundreds of millions of people all around the planet. She had no idea she was going to be doing that. She literally gave more. No matter what your income is, do not believe your gift doesn't count. When you give, God sees the heart, and the heart is real; the intent is real. God can take two fish and five loaves and feed a multitude. God is the ultimate multiplier.

8. A new financial partner.

When you step into generosity, you align yourself with the unseen jet stream of the

universe. Jesus put it like this: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”

The reality of God’s involvement in your financial life is so powerful that it’s worth pausing to reiterate giving is not something you do just so we can get more money.

Here’s another most likely apocryphal story-about the offering at a little church. When somebody put \$100 in the plate, the pastor got so excited he said, “Whoever put this in, come up to the front. You can pick out three hymns.” This shy, elderly woman came to the front, beamed at the congregation, pointed to the three best-looking men, and said, “I’ll pick him, him, and him.”

The point being that giving is not something we do to get external rewards: more wealth, a better reputation, or trophy spouses. The truth is based on Scripture, you cannot out-give God. This is true with your time. Get generous with your time. See if God does not multiply your time and energy in ways that build your faith. This is true with your money. The beginning level of giving for Israel was called the tithe, where people gave God the first 10 percent of their income.

They would call it the first fruits. People have a hard time trusting God with money. Here’s what God said: “‘Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it’” (Malachi 3:10).

One of our kids has a PhD in physics. I had to stop helping him with his math homework when he was about six years old. I “get” the old math. I don’t get this. In the Kingdom of God, it’s as if God says, You have to do new math. The old math in our world says if I have \$100 and I give away \$10, I’ll have \$90 left. In other words, the more I give, the less I have. In the Kingdom of God, the foundation of reality is when you are generous, God enters into the equation. Ninety percent with God is more than 100 percent without God. This is the only arena in which God actually says, “Test me.” Because we have such a hard time trusting.

I want to encourage you, if you’ve never taken that step toward becoming a regular tither to God, don’t miss the blessing of that. Trusting God with your finances, leading a generous life, discovering it’s more blessed to give than to receive, having the discipline to become a tither, getting real about being a giver and not a taker, learning to do this in secret, so I am not walking in my reputation anymore, walking hand-in-hand through this life with generosity, that’s the reward of generosity.

Chapter 11 - The Lord's Prayer

PRAYING

If you've ever been dissatisfied with your prayer life, if you ever feel guilty about not praying enough, or confused about how prayer works-or even if prayer works, I'm talking to you right now.

Just to be clear, this is who I'm not talking to: if prayer comes easily to you, if your mind never wanders while you pray, if you're never troubled by unanswered prayer, if when somebody cuts you off on the freeway, your reflexive response is a prayer of blessing, if when you win \$ 10 million dollars in the lottery, your first response is to pray, "God, thank you, and forgive me for playing the lottery. Help me tithe to my church." If you are a prayer Jedi warrior, then this chapter is not for you.

This is for the rest of us because it's a strange truth about us. To be human is to pray. In moments of great need, great joy, great fear, great guilt, and great sadness, we speak to someone or something beyond ourselves. We cannot help it. To be human is to pray, and yet we wonder, "Is it so complicated? Are there rules? Am I doing it wrong?"

In the middle of the greatest talk ever delivered, Jesus, after telling us about praying in secret so that we are not trying to impress other people, gives us the greatest prayer ever prayed. He starts with a few warnings, so we'll look at the warnings first. Jesus says, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full."

There's a wonderful line from the book *The Catcher in the Rye*: "If you do something too good, then, after a while, if you don't watch it, you start showing off. And then you're not as good anymore."¹ Even prayer can be one of those things people who think they are good at it start showing off. Sometimes, when I'm with a group of people and somebody else is praying, instead of actually listening to their prayer so I'm praying with them, I'm thinking about what I will pray when it's my turn. Will I sound sincere and appropriate? Will I sound foolish, stupid, or unspiritual? I don't want to be thinking these thoughts; they're just in me when I'm supposed to be praying.

So, Jesus gives an alternative strategy. "But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." In Jesus' day on poor farms in Palestine, they did not have private bedrooms. The only room that had a door that could be closed and locked might be a supply room that would have food, tools, and maybe small animals in it. This would look like a room where nothing important ever happens.

One good reason to pray in private is that if you do it badly, only God will know-and God doesn't care. Beyond that, Jesus is addressing here one of the great barriers that we face in prayer: God is unseen. God sees what is done in secret. Prayer is based on the reality of the unseen, but in our day, we have been conditioned to believe only what is seen or can be touched is really real.

This gets us deep into Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount. What is most real is God and his kingdom. That means the most important part of you is unseen. The reason you're reading this is you formed an intention to. No one has ever seen an intention. They might see neurons or synapses, but not an intention. Your thoughts, desires, and choices are all unseen. Your body (your neurons in your eyes and legs, that which is seen) responds to what is unseen. In other words, to put it in a way that might be quite controversial in our day, matter is not indifferent to personality. In fact, matter made by human beings (computers, cell phones, and donuts) all began as ideas, as unseen. Jesus says what is true of persons is also true of the universe in general. Reality that is seen is undergirded by reality that is unseen and yet real. It is there where we are, and we meet God, who is unseen. Prayer is hard for us because we think if we're not moving and achieving visible progress, nothing is happening.

This starts very early for human beings. I was talking to my sister one time. She was watching her then 10-month-old granddaughter. While we were on the phone, every few minutes, the baby would cry. I asked why. They were driving, and it turns out her granddaughter hates red lights. She wants to be moving. She wants to make progress, and she's got places to go. Every time they had to stop at a red light, she would wail out loud. She is ten months old, and she is already in too much of a hurry for red lights!

Prayer often feels to us like we're sitting at a red light. Nothing is happening. Sometimes, you pray and you don't get what you want. You feel like you're sitting at a red light, and it's never going to change. That's the barrier. Jesus knows this about us. He goes on, “. . do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.”

Often, we think of prayer in superstitious ways. In an old Charlie Brown cartoon, Linus once said, “I have just made an important theological discovery. While you are praying, if you hold your hands upside down, you get the opposite of what you pray for.” You might be thinking, “Maybe that's been my problem!”

I've heard pastors (who should know better) at churches pray, “God, bless us as we come into your presence this morning.” I imagine God (who the Bible says is present throughout all time and space) saying, “Where do you think you've been?” Or people will sit down in front of a meal loaded with grease, lard, butter, sugar, fat, and cholesterol and pray, “God, bless this food for the nourishment of our bodies.” You

might as well pray, “God, bless this food to the hardening of our arteries,” because that’s what’s going to happen.

The pagans did not realize prayer to the God of Israel was intelligent, thoughtful conversation about what we are doing together. The reason that your mind matters so much is it is only through our minds that we make contact with reality. That’s true of physical reality, and it’s especially true with God. When we pray, above all times, we want our minds to be at their best, clearest.

So, Jesus gives these warnings, and then he gives one of his best gifts: this grand prayer. Getting advice from Jesus on how to pray is like getting advice from Warren Buffett on how to invest. Why wouldn’t we take that?

The takeaway from this chapter is really quite simple. It’s called the Lord’s Prayer. Pray this prayer Jesus taught us to pray. I do this each day at the beginning of prayer time. You might want to make a commitment to pray it first thing in the morning. I know of some people who, just to help them remember, actually put their toothbrush under their bed at night so they have to get down on their knees and start their day with prayer. When we do this, the idea is not just to rush through the words in a rote way but to immerse our minds in them.

So, let’s think through this prayer for a moment:

“Our Father in heaven...” This reminds us prayer is not the same thing as worrying out loud. Prayer is “thinking through” in conversation with God. That means we address God. Any time I talk to or email somebody, I don’t just say, “Hey, you.” In an intimate relationship, we often have private names, terms of endearment.

When a first grandchild comes along in a family, their lisping attempt at “Grandma” and “Grandpa” often becomes the grandparents’ new ongoing names. My father became “Bepa.” My mom became “Nina.” When our kids were growing up, one of them would do an impersonation of me that went like this: “I’m Daddy. Feed me!” With one of my kids, to this day, my name is often “The fat one.” Every time I see a text with that address, I smile.

Jesus says we’re to call the Creator and Judge of all things “Father.” The whole gospel is wrapped up in that first word. Whatever your earthly daddy was like, you have a heavenly Father who made you, loves you, and watches over you. And I remember now, when I pray, “Our Father,” I remember God never says, “What is it now? What do you want now?” When I pray, “Our Father,” I remember I am special, but I am not more special than. Every single human being I see is loved by Father God.

“Our Father in heaven...” Now, what do you think of when you think about heaven?

Which is closer: heaven or your next-door neighbor? Literally, Jesus says, “Our Father in the heavens.” It’s plural for a reason. Dallas Willard writes about this in *The Divine Conspiracy*: In the ancient world, they thought of different levels of the heavens. There was the atmosphere way up where the stars were; there was the sky above our heads, but also the air right around me. We might pray, “Our Father who is closer than the air I breathe.” When you pray, “Our Father who is in heaven,” don’t think of him being way out there, far away.

“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name... ” That means, “God, may your reputation on earth be greatly enhanced. Many people come to realize how wonderful you are. May you be genuinely adored, worshiped, and praised.”

Now, sometimes people wonder, “Why does God want us to praise him all the time? Is he like some kind of cosmic narcissist who just needs people to prop up his little divine ego?”

It’s important to know that worship is not something we do to boost God’s self-esteem. C.S. Lewis writes quite helpfully about this. This is an aspect of the human condition; when we see something we love, we naturally desire to praise it. In fact, the act of praising it doesn’t just express our joy; it becomes part of our joy. When we see Niagara Falls or a whale out in the ocean, something that moves us, we want to let other people know.

Imagine the frustration that you would experience if your favorite team won a championship but you were not allowed to cheer! You can’t keep your cheers quiet in a great moment. Part of our joy is being able to praise. Lewis goes on to say: Imagine, for example, that you’re a single person, and the beauty that you see is in another person. You would want to express your praise then to that person. All enjoyment spontaneously tends to overflow into praise: a lover praising his beloved, fans praising their team, praises of weather, food, flowers, books, sunsets, or puppies. Praise is inner health made audible. G.K. Chesterton said, “I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder. The worst moment for an atheist is when he is really thankful and has no one to thank.”² God is most worthy of praise. So we say, “Hallowed be your name.”

Then, “... your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ” Ever have your mind wander when you pray? For me, this is why prayer can be so hard. My mind is pathetically random. I can see a pop-up ad on my cell phone: “Go to this site and find out what happened to this child star from the 90s” and think, “I have to know what happened.” even though I don’t know who that person is! I cannot trust my thoughts to dwell on what matters most. On autopilot, my mind goes to worry. I start praying, and then the next thing I know, I’m worrying about one of my kids, one of my problems.

This part of the Lord's Prayer serves to reorient my mind. Often, in a shopping center, there might be a map with a little star that says, "You are here." I remember now, "... your kingdom..." I am not located in my problems. I am not located in my sin or guilt. I am located in the Kingdom of God.

I am who I am because that's God's will, and I want to be a part of that great project of God's will being done on earth. This leads to a prayer of surrender: "God, your will be done in me, in my body, with my time, with my money, with my energy.

That leads naturally to the next request. "Give us today our daily bread." For this part of the prayer, I'll often say, "God, here is my calendar." Here are the meetings and tasks that I have today. "God, would you help me with this? Give me, today, what I need for today." Manna, daily bread. It's not, "Give me what I'll need for the rest of my life." "Give us today..."

If you have little children, imagine serving them breakfast. When they come to the table, they have their Fruit Loops, but they put half of their Fruit Loops in a little plastic baggie to save them. When you ask them why, they say, "Well, I'm not sure there's gonna be food around tomorrow." You would tell that little child, "Hey, tomorrow is not your job. Tomorrow is my job. Your job is today. You just receive what I give you today."³

Worry is always about tomorrow, always about the future. But I find I can face pretty much anything if I do it with God, one day at a time. "Give us today our daily bread." Give me what I need for today: wisdom for today, strength for today, love for today, and joy for today. Tomorrow will come tomorrow. "Give me what I need today."

"And forgive us our debts..." Writer Neal Plantinga wrote, "Recalling and confessing our sin is like taking out the garbage: once is not enough."⁴ People sometimes wonder, "How often do I need to confess my sin?" Well, how often do you sin?

Dallas Willard writes about one time his then 3-year-old granddaughter was playing with a hose in the backyard. She discovered how to make mud, and she was making a huge mess. Dallas's wife Jane, the grandma (named Nana), had been reading, facing the other direction. She saw the mud everywhere, cleaned up the mess, told her granddaughter not to make any more mud, and turned toward her so she was now reading but facing her granddaughter. Her granddaughter wanted to make mud, wanted to play with mud, so she said very sweetly to her grandmother, "Don't look at me, Nana, okay?" Nana agreed. Every once in a while, as that 3-year-old wallowed in the forbidden mud, she would say in a charming voice, "Don't look at me, Nana." Dallas Willard writes, thus, the tender soul of a little child shows how necessary it is to us that we be unobserved in our wrong.⁵ I sometimes think this is the real sinner's prayer: "Don't look at me, God. I

want to indulge my temper, ignore the poor, gratify this appetite, give less than my best at work, deceive this person, vent on this email, self-promote... Don't look at me."

Doing wrong requires us to put God out of our minds. We do that so often that we don't even notice. Dallas notes we wonder why God seems so far away. That is why every day we pray, "Forgive us our debts." At night, it can be a good idea to review the past day, go through one scene at a time. Ask God to show me where I was "playing in the mud."

"God, is there something I need to go back to clean up? Where was I unkind or selfish or dishonest? Where do I need to make amends?" "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."

It is psychologically impossible to have a tender heart toward God and a hard heart toward others. Not that we shouldn't do that; we can't. Have you ever prayed this prayer? "God, help me to hold this grudge against my coworker with bitterness and superiority." Any time I hold a grudge, I have to say, "Don't look at me, God." I cannot embrace God's forgiveness of me and simultaneously retain unforgiveness of another person. It's not that I shouldn't; we are not able to. It's the wholeness of the human soul.

The next phrase, "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." "God, keep me from falling into my worst self. Give me the strength not to enter into the destructive habits and patterns that I know I will on my own." I saw another prayer not long ago that expresses the amount of help I personally need. It goes like this: "Dear God, so far, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over indulgent. I'm really glad about that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help. Thank you. Amen." Somebody is going to lead me. Who is it going to be?

Some time ago, I visited my parents, who lived in a seniors' community of over 18,000 people. It's a huge place. It's not fancy, but there are security gates there. I had to leave early in the morning to catch a plane; my folks were sound asleep. I told Siri to guide me to the airport, but she led me to an exit out of this huge community where a gate was down, and there was nobody present to open it. I did a U-turn, drove a long time, and asked her again. She led me to another exit, where the gate was barred again. There was no one to let me out. I was going to miss my plane. I was stressed. I was mad at Siri. I was mad at the village. I was mad at my parents for living in the village. I was mad at myself for not thinking ahead. Then, a thought came into my mind: "You could pray." So I did. "God, deliver me from this retirement village." In the darkness, I saw the headlights of another car. Then another thought came, "You could follow that car." It struck me that an 85 or 90-year-old person probably wouldn't have stayed out partying all night and then come home at 4:30 in the morning, so there was a good chance

whoever was driving that car was trying to get out, and they'd know how. I followed them, and I got out.

It made me think. I know this is just a trivial moment, but how often in the moments of my day do I not pray, "God, deliver me from this temptation to not trust you?" How often do I not pray, "God, deliver me from this anger?", Deliver me from this fear, deliver me from this folly?" How often do I not pray, "God, guide me and show me where to go." He has a light just waiting, and he is saying, "Just ask me, and I will lead you. I will deliver you." "God, lead me not into temptation. Deliver me from evil." Now, if you look at Matthew 6:13, you will notice that the Lord's Prayer actually ends there. "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

Jesus has a tendency to end his material on a hard or jarring note. We'll see this again in the Sermon on the Mount when we get to the end of it. The final line is how a storm comes to the foolish man's house, built on the sand and it falls. ". ..and great was its fall." Boom! The end. Or Jesus tells a story of the Prodigal Son who comes back home. There was a big party. The elder brother goes outside. He is resentful and grudging. His father goes out and pleads, "Come inside." Boom! The end.

Often, as a master teacher, Jesus doesn't "pretty stuff up." He knows an unresolved ending sticks in our minds-and he is after changing our lives. Very early on, Jesus' followers added these words to his great prayer, and they're now part of the prayer as well: "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." "God, you are large and in charge. Then there is the final word: "Amen."

Something about that little word also.

I might be the only one, but I've noticed that sometimes I would go to pray by myself, and my mind would wander. Then I'd find myself not praying anymore, and I'd just quit and go off to the rest of my day. I would never do that in a conversation; If I was talking with you, I wouldn't just have my words trail off and just wander away.

Just as it's good to begin a prayer conversation with God by addressing him, it's good to close it-to end on a note of prayer and praise. This little word, amen, is more than just a way of saying "The end." It is this ringing affirmation of the spirit. "Yes! So be it! This is just the way we want it." "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever." Dallas wrote you might occasionally (if your nerves can take it) try, "Whoopee!" I imagine God himself would not mind.

So here's the takeaway: Pray the prayer Jesus taught us to pray at least once each day. Don't rush it. Fill each phrase with your own thoughts, your own desires. Make it your own prayer.

We saw earlier this is the most prayed prayer in the history of the human race, and no other one comes close. Since our teacher, Jesus taught us this prayer, it has been prayed in more languages, across more continents, in more cultures and civilizations, century after century, for 2,000 years, more than any other.

When we say this prayer, we humbly and grandly join in a great chain of prayer that has not stopped from the first day Jesus uttered it until we utter it right now.

Chapter 12 - Forgiveness And Its Alternative

FORGIVENESS

Once, there was a tech startup that cared for its employees on an unprecedented scale. They offered onsite meals; onsite massage; childcare; senior care; pet care; auto care; flextime; three-year maternity, paternity, aunt, and uncle leave; free snacks; free therapy; free plastic surgery; a company-issued computer; a company-issued car; a company-issued condo; a company-issued spouse if you wanted.¹

They were the best of the best. They were called AppleGooFacebazon.com. They quickly became number one on the Forbes Best Places to Work list. In fact, everybody at Forbes quit there to go work at AppleGooFacebazon.com. It came as a shock when the CFO got caught with his hand in the cookie jar. The company culture revered integrity. He was a highly compensated C-level executive, but the money he had embezzled and lost exceeded his net worth on a huge scale.

This crime was discovered on a weekend. Social media blew up. The whole world knew about it. On Monday, the old man called the CFO, had his senior leadership team come in. People called the CEO the “old man” behind his back because he was the founder, the owner, and the oldest person in the organization. He was 26. Everybody knew what was coming: ruin and disgrace.

When he walked into the old man’s office, something happened in the mind of the CFO. He knew he had nothing to lose. He threw up a Hail Mary. Gets down on his knees. Begs for mercy. “Think of my wife, my poor kids. Give me time; I’ll pay back what I owe.” The other members of the team were amused by this. For one thing, the debt could not be repaid, not in a million years. For another thing, it was all his fault. Why should he embarrass himself and all of them like that?

But if they were surprised by his behavior, that was nothing compared to what they experienced when they looked at the old man. Instead of calling for Security, he sat there as if he were really considering this unthinkable request. His face softened. Tears welled. Then he spoke. He did not give the CFO time to pay back the debt. He just canceled it. “You don’t owe a thing,” he said. No prison. No disgrace. “Go tell your family it’s okay. Then come back and work here again.”

He put the word out on Twitter because this was a big story. The CFO tweeted out a single phrase: forgiven #grace. Everybody was captivated by this story of forgiveness. It was unprecedented. It made the rounds on NPR and This American Life.

The economists did a cover story on it. Taylor Swift actually wrote a song about it and

sold a ton. But strangely, that was not the end of the story. The CFO went back to work. He was checking out PayPal on company time when he saw a guy in his department owed him \$50. This was a low-level guy, data entry, minimum wage. The CFO went down to collect. “Pay me what you owe me.” The low level guy explained he didn’t have it on him. He was the sole support for his aging parents. Could he just have until payday? This was going on at the guy’s workspace, and a bunch of employees were watching. They knew what was going to happen. They knew the CFO was going to show grace, just like he had received it. Not only that, his debt had been unpayable, huge. This amount was way smaller. He had been on the receiving end of enormous grace. So he would be primed for the chance to show some grace.

They waited for the moment they knew was coming—but it did not come. His face did not soften. His eyes stayed dry. His heart remained hard. “You will rue the day you got behind with me,” the CFO said.

“Pack up your things.

You’re gone!” He called Security and had the man escorted out of the building.

The employees who witnessed this scene were stunned. “How could somebody who had been forgiven an infinite debt be so unforgiving over a pittance? How could somebody who had received so much mercy refuse to give a little bit?” Word got back to HQ. The boss called the CFO back into his office one more time. This time, the meeting was short.

“You thought my grace meant I was a fuzzy-minded, incompetent, inattentive leader who would let you get away with whatever you wanted. But you were mistaken. You were shown forgiveness but would not offer it. You were given grace but would not extend it. Have it your way.”

The man was handed over to the court system, tried, convicted, and imprisoned until he could pay back the unpayable debt. A single phrase got tweeted out: unforgiven judgment.

By now, you might have recognized this is actually a version of a famous story Jesus told about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. It is not a subtle story, but in case anybody might miss the meaning of it, Jesus spells it out. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

This is a story about the human race. God is lavishly generous, Jesus says. Human beings have accumulated a mountain of moral debt, and we add to this all the time. Every time I’m less than honest, or fudge an expense account, or I am unloving to a 5-

year-old, every time I shouldn't have made a cutting remark, but I did when I should've spoken in love, but I did not when I gossiped or am ungrateful or I close my eyes to the poor, every nursed grudge, every selfish act, every self-righteous attitude, every time that I turn a blind eye toward racism, - all of this is adding to that debt.

We're all in the same boat. Takes me less than 30 seconds to come up with a list like that because I have done all of those and much more. One day, at the cross of Jesus, God took pity on me and canceled my debt.

But the story doesn't stop there. We've been looking at the Lord's Prayer. In the middle of it, Jesus taught us to pray, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." Charles Williams wrote, "No word in English carries a greater possibility of terror than the little word 'as' in that clause."

Jesus is so serious about this that he adds a little postscript. People who study these things say when you send out an email, the single item that is most likely to be read and remembered is the P.S. Jesus gives a P.S. to his prayer.: "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. "

That sounds rather severe to us. Sometimes, people will think, "God has to forgive me if I ask him. That's his job!" It's important to notice Jesus is not saying, "Now God could forgive you, but he is withholding forgiveness to motivate you to be more forgiving." Jesus is commenting on the nature of forgiveness and the human condition. There is a vast chasm between wanting to be forgiven versus just wanting to get out of trouble. They are not the same thing.

Years ago, I went fishing on a little lake with my brother-in-law. We are not fishermen, but it was a family vacation. The place where we were staying had a small rowboat and some poles. We were out fishing. A man boated over to us and asked how we were doing. "Not great," we said and showed him our puny little fish.

He turned out to be the game warden. He literally towed us to shore like we were going to row away, and he fined us. We tried to get out of the fine. We told him we were going to set the fish free; we intended them no harm. We told him we were both pastors. He was not impressed-his brother was a priest. Darn! All we wanted was to get out of trouble. We didn't want to have to pay the fine; we didn't really want to be forgiven.

Here's a different scenario: When I was around 40 years old, I slowly came to realize that for more than a decade, I'd had a pattern of chronic withdrawal and coldness toward my wife. It was deep. It was emotional, physical, spiritual, and painful. When it finally became fully clear to me, I wanted so much to be forgiven, but not so I could avoid pain.

In fact, I knew forgiveness would mean really hard conversations, a lot of truth-telling, counsel, and more pain.

If I want you to forgive me, it means I agree with you that I have done wrong. If I don't think I've done something wrong, I don't want to be forgiven.

I had an acquaintance once who had behaved quite badly. It involved gossip and betrayal. When I tried to talk with him about it, he just retreated into silence. Some years later, he wrote that he forgave me for not having been in contact enough.

If I want to be forgiven-not just to avoid trouble, it means I recognize I have done wrong, and I want to become the kind of person who wouldn't do that. Imagine if I were to have said to Nancy, "I don't want to quit withdrawing. I don't want to quit being cold. I don't want to quit pouting when you displease me. I just want you not to complain about it." In that case, I wouldn't want a forgiver. I would just want an enabler.

If I truly want to be forgiven by God, I agree with him that I have done wrong. Forgiveness is always a gift of grace. Receiving forgiveness usually involves a lot of work. That's repentance. That, too, is enabled by grace. If I cling to resentment toward other people, grudge-holding, bitterness, and so on, then I don't want to be forgiven. I don't want to repent. I don't want to become a new creature and live in the reality of the kingdom. So God will not force me to.

Understand, it is not psychologically possible for us to know God's tenderhearted pity toward us and remain hardhearted toward others. This is called by Dallas Willard, the unity of spiritual orientation. I can't have one posture toward God and another posture toward people. It's not that you shouldn't. It's impossible because I'm one person with one character.

We see this reflected in many statements in the Bible. "For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen." I am a whole being, and my character pervades everything I do.

Sometimes, we'll read about famous people who were caught in a breach of character whose apology sounds like this: "I apologize, although I don't remember doing it. That action does not reflect who I am." But, of course, it does! Our actions always say... "I am the one who did that. I am the one who said that." My true character is revealed not by the values I publicly profess but precisely by what I say and do. This is the unity of spiritual orientation. Jesus came into a world that was governed by the law of retaliation.

"You help me; I'll help you. You hurt me; I'll hurt you.

This is what we do naturally in the flesh. But now, there is another way, “As a father pities his children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him. ’James writes, “...the Lord is full of pity and compassion... ” Later on, “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous... ”

There is a keyword in Jesus’ story in Matthew 18. “The servant’s master took pity on him, ” We don’t use the word much anymore. Mercy or compassion is okay. Pity offends my pride. Pity makes us wince. “I don’t want your pity,” we say. The truth is, I am a pitiable person. If my family is going to love me, it will not be on the basis of my strength. They must have pity on me. You might have read Tolkien’s trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, and if you have, you may know that pity is the key to the story. Early on, the Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, has gotten the Ring of Power, and he is invisible. He has to get past Gollum (who used to have the Ring) to escape the cave where he is trapped. Gollum wants to kill Bilbo but cannot see him. Tolkien writes of Bilbo, “He must stab the foul thing, put its eyes out, kill it.”

Then something happens. “A sudden understanding, a pity mixed with horror, welled up in Bilbo’s heart: a glimpse of endless unmarked days without light or hope... ” Bilbo has pity for Gollum. He refuses to repay evil for evil. Much later, Frodo has to deal with Gollum. Frodo says to the wizard Gandalf, “It’s a pity Bilbo didn’t kill him... ” Gandalf says, “Pity? It was pity that stayed in Bilbo’s hand. [...] Be sure that he took so little hurt from the evil...because he began his ownership of the Ring so. With Pity.” At the end of the story, as you may know, when Frodo was not strong enough, it is through this Gollum that the Ring is destroyed. It was pity that saved the world.²

We all think we’re going to be brilliant, strong, and beautiful, but in the end, we are loved and accepted on the basis of pity from God and from others. So we learn to live in a world, in a kingdom of forgiveness. On the cross, it was pity that moved our Master to pay our debt. On the cross, it was pity that saved the world.

“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ” We all have some debtors.

Will you choose grace? This does not mean you excuse or tolerate wrongdoing. It may not even mean reconciling if the other person refuses to be reconciled.

Philip Yancey wrote a wonderful book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*. He writes this about the power of unforgiveness, “I have a friend whose marriage has gone through tumultuous times. One night, George passed a breaking point. He pounded the table and the floor. ‘I hate you!’ he screamed at his wife. ‘I won’t take it anymore! I’ve had enough! I won’t go on! [...] No! No! No!’ Several months later, George woke up in the middle of the night and heard strange sounds coming from the room where his two-year-

old son slept. He padded down the hall, stood for a moment outside his son's door, and shivers ran through his flesh. He could not draw a breath. In a soft voice, the two-year old was repeating word for word with precise inflection the argument between his mother and father. 'I hate you... I won't take it anymore... No! No! No!' George realized that in some awful way, he had just bequeathed his pain and anger and hatred to the next generation.³

This is the story of our pitiless world, the story of unforgiveness. But there is another way. A scholar named Walter Wink wrote about two peacemakers who visited with Polish Christians after the Second World War and asked them, "Would you be willing to meet with some Christians from West Germany because they want to ask forgiveness for what Germany did? They want to begin a new relationship. Will you meet with them?"

Silence. "What you are asking is impossible. Every stone in Warsaw is soaked with Polish blood that they spilled. We cannot forgive." They finished the conversation, and they decided to close by saying the Lord's Prayer together. They got to these words, And forgive us our debts, as we... " Everybody stopped praying. There was silence in the room. They were greatly distressed.

One of these Polish Christians said, "I can no longer say this prayer or call myself a Christian if I don't forgive. Humanly speaking, I can't do it. But God will give us the strength." Eighteen months later, Polish Christians and German Christians met in Vienna and eventually established a relationship that lasted the rest of their lives.³

I know forgiving can be terribly complex and frightfully deep. It is a journey that may take weeks or years or decades. But I wonder, over the last 2,000 years, how many marriages might have been changed, how many families, how many friendships, how many lives, if we had stopped at that one line when we prayed the Lord's Prayer.

"And forgive us our debts, as we... "

We'll stop there, let the Holy Spirit work, and think about that one little word: 'as'.

Chapter 13 - Fasting As Feasting

FASTING

“When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ”

Fasting. What a weird idea. Why in the world would anybody want to do that? Why would you ever be hungry and not eat right away? Why would you have an appetite and not immediately satisfy it? Who would ever deliberately deny themselves something? Is not the road to the good life making sure any time you have a craving for anything, you find a way to get it with the shortest delay possible?

If you've ever been a parent, you know the number one rule of good parenting is, “Make sure your kid always gets whatever they want the moment they want it.” If you're looking for a good potential spouse or a good potential employee, the number one quality to look for in somebody is the demand for immediate gratification of their every desire.

So, fasting is really weird. I'm not going to try to talk you into trying it.

You're not going to want to do it. It's a strange, ancient practice that has no place in our enlightened world. It is for little, emaciated monks in loincloths who enjoy being miserable. But Jesus did cover it in the Sermon on the Mount, so we have to talk about it.

In fact, not just Jesus. If you look at people in the Bible who fasted, it's like a “Who's Who” of Scripture. Moses, King David, Elijah, Ezra the priest, and prophets like Zechariah, Jeremiah, and Amos. Isaiah called for a great fast that would be connected to social justice and care for the hungry and the poor. When Esther had to risk her life by protesting to the king of Persia, she first went with her friends to spend three days in fasting and prayer, and she called every Israelite to do the same. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, all Israel would fast in repentance for their sin.

Then, in the New Testament, an old woman named Anna was actually prepared to recognize the baby Jesus through a lifetime of prayer and fasting. John the Baptist fasted. Jesus himself began his ministry with 40 days of fasting and prayer.

You don't need to fast; I just have to tell you what's in the Bible. When the apostle Paul met Jesus, he fasted for three days. Later, the early church worshiped with fasting and prayer when the Holy Spirit told them to commission Paul for ministry. Paul would fast and pray to identify elders for the churches he began.

Fasting is associated in the Bible with repentance from sin. Fasting is associated in the Bible with great breakthroughs in prayer and life. Fasting in the Bible is often a part of worship and often accompanies requests for guidance. I'll tell you how highly fasting was regarded in the Bible. You might remember this story.

The prophet Jonah, went to preach at Nineveh. He didn't want to go. He tried to run away, but he got swallowed by a whale and regurgitated. He preached in Nineveh-the worst sermon in history. "Forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." That was his whole sermon. There was nothing about God, grace, or what to do-but look at the response. "The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth" (Jonah 3:5).

This is a pagan city. On their first day of faith, they are fasting. Not just that, the king of Nineveh issued a proclamation: "Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God." It was not just the pagan foreigners. Their animals are fasting for crying out loud! Probably not happy about this, but they're fasting. It seems the only characters in the book of Jonah who don't fast are Jonah and the whale. Actually, the whale does a "reverse fast" when he gets rid of Jonah, so really, it's only Jonah. You don't need to do this, but just out of curiosity, why was fasting such a big deal in the ancient world? In fact, it wasn't even invented in the Bible. It was practiced by sages like Confucius. In ancient Greece, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all fasted. It was considered a helpful practice for human flourishing.

In the Bible, and then particularly with Jesus, it becomes a way to experience and depend on the reality of the kingdom. Fasting is simply the practice of abstaining from food, possibly drink, and possibly other things for a period of time. You decide how long that period is, but it has to involve a long enough time to experience some hunger. The time between breakfast and lunch does not count as a fast.

I first began to experiment with fasting about 30 years ago when I saw how much the Bible has to say about it-but I did not want to! I'll say a word about this because you may have the same thoughts as I did. I love food! I love butter. I love chocolate, spaghetti, hamburgers, cheesecake, creme brulee. I love peanut butter, hot cinnamon rolls, barbecued spareribs. I love freshly baked bread. I love Krispy Kreme, In-N-Out. I love Orville Redenbacher, Betty Crocker, Colonel Sanders, Mrs. Butterworth, Chef Boyardee, and the Pillsbury Doughboy. They are some of my heroes!

Fasting doesn't mean it's wrong to love food. Food is good. Food is God's idea. "Give us today our daily bread." But our desires need to be disciplined, or they become our gods. The first thing I noticed the first time I fasted was I got really hungry, and I realized how much my body insists on having its way. I began to learn about the kind of grip food has on my life. I discovered I might be using food or drink or some other substance to try to comfort my flesh, to avoid being bored, when I was afraid of something, when I felt empty. I became aware of this when I began to fast. I also learned it's possible to have an unsatisfied appetite and not only survive-but thrive! It's possible to learn, in small ways, the art of suffering happily.

There is a very famous research study called the "Marshmallow Test." Researchers gave a marshmallow to each child in a group of 5-year-olds and promised two marshmallows if they could resist the temptation to eat it for a specific period of time. This was Genesis 3 for kindergartners: "You must not eat of the marshmallow of good and evil." Then, the researchers watched the ancient human struggle between appetite and self-control. Of course, many of them ate the marshmallow. They chose instant gratification. I don't know what your marshmallow is. Maybe it's pride. Maybe it's a wrong relationship. Maybe it's gossip or money or judging or being resentful. I know what temptation does: It whispers: "You're entitled. You've been working so hard. You've resisted so much. Your spouse doesn't understand you. You're entitled to be happy. What you want is not that bad.

The children in this study were learning to do a tiny little 15-minute fast. What's remarkable is the children who, at the age of 5, were able to say no to the marshmallows, grew up to have healthier bodies. They did better in school, they were more successful in their work, they had more stable relationships, actually had fewer problems with substance abuse.¹

Fasting is a practice given by God to help us be in charge of our body instead of the other way around. This generally connects to the role of spiritual disciplines in the life of a disciple. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 9:25 about athletes trying to win a great contest. He said, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it [that is, go into strict training] to get a crown that will not last, but we do it..." "We do... .what? Go into strict training "... to get a crown that will last forever."

Here's a concept Dallas Willard taught about that was tremendously helpful to me. There is an enormous difference between trying to do something versus training to do something.

Think about your own life. Could you go out right now, today, and run (not walk, run) every step of a marathon? Or put it another way. Could you go out right now and run (not walk) every step of a marathon today if you tried really, really, really, really hard?

Not many of us could. However, my guess is most of us could eventually run a marathon if we did one thing, and that is to train. Now, to train, as Dallas would say, means I arrange my life around those activities that enable me to do what I cannot now do by direct effort. We tend to overestimate what we can do by trying really hard and underestimate what we can do by training.

This is true in athletics or music or intellectual life. It is no less true of character formation. This is why Paul says, . train yourself to godliness. "This is why Jesus says, "The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher" (Luke 6:40).

I realize that words like discipline or training are awful words. Who wants to do that? This is important: Spiritual disciplines are not necessarily unpleasant. What discipline you need to practice depends on what you're training to do. If you're training for a race, you will need to practice running. If you were training for a pie-eating contest, you would need to practice eating a lot of pie. If you eat a lot of pie every day, a year from now, I promise you'll be able to eat much more pie than you could today by trying really hard.

For instance, In the Bible, one of the great commandments is to rejoice. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit. People often hear that and think, "I have to try harder to be more joyful." No, it kills people when they think spiritual life is just about trying harder. It works no better than trying really hard to run a marathon today. We become a more joyful person when we enter into training for joy. If I want to become more joyful, what's often needed is called the discipline of celebration: Have a day to celebrate. Wear what you love to wear. Eat what you love to eat. That's "marshmallow" day. Listen to music you love to hear.

The purpose of spiritual disciplines is always freedom. That's why a pianist practices scales, so they're free to play great music without worry or great effort. That's true of an athlete, and that's true of the spiritual world as well. We practice disciplines, so we are able to live with love and joy and peace.

Fasting is a means to an end. If you never struggle with impulse control and all of your desires have learned to quietly wait their turn, then don't fast. If your appetites for food, sex, money, pleasure, power consistently say, "No, no. Don't gratify us when it might conflict with the greater value," then don't fast if you don't need to.

It may be that you struggle with an eating disorder. Just reading these words has been painful to you. The topic of food is quite painful. In that case, fasting may be exactly what you don't want to do because it would not be helpful to you. It may be that fasting would be an unhelpful practice for medical reasons. Then don't fast, and by all means, don't feel guilty about the topic. Our quest is to live in the kingdom.

But for some of us whose bodies are particularly stubborn about having their own way, fasting can be a helpful practice. Remember, the dynamic is we practice it in a spirit of humility, freedom, surrender, and grace. The psalmist said, “I humbled myself with fasting.”

In Luke 11:13, Jesus told a story about a religious leader called a Pharisee who was quite proud and prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people... I fast twice a week...” Pharisees in Jesus’ day had a custom of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, which were “market days,” when they would have the biggest possible audience. If you walk around saying, “Look at me! I’m fasting! I can do it for days. I love God so much, I make myself miserable,” then you end up worse than if you’d never fasted at all.

You can’t become humble by trying really hard to be humble. That’s why Jesus adds to fasting another practice of secrecy. Do something good like fasting. Only don’t tell anybody about it and then you can get free of the need to impress them. When spiritual disciplines are not practiced in humility for the purpose of freedom, they can leave you worse off than if we’d never done them. But in the unlikely event that you would actually want to try fasting, I’ll give you a couple formats for it that you might attempt:

1. Fasting as feasting on God.

I began with a 24-hour fast that started at the end of dinner in the evening, then skipped breakfast and lunch the next day and ate again at dinner. When I fast, I’m not just avoiding food; I’m making space to be nourished by God. Jesus makes a fascinating statement to help us with this. We’re told, “After fasting forty days and forty nights, [Jesus] was hungry.” I sometimes think this may be the single most unnecessary sentence in the Bible. Really? You had to tell us that? But the writer wants us to know Jesus was a real human being just like us, and he knew the pain of hunger. The Tempter comes and whispers to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” “Eat the marshmallow. You’re entitled. You’re the Son of God. You don’t have to deliberately suffer.”

“Jesus answered, ‘It is written: “Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.”’ Jesus means this quite literally. Food simply becomes a part of my body—I digest it and assimilate it. Interestingly, words are the same way. A word comes from a parent to a child. “Don’t be afraid. I’m with you.” That word from the parent literally connects neural pathways in the child’s brain. It causes synapses to form that allow the child to regulate, comfort, and encourage them. A word literally becomes a part of our body. Your body is physiologically and neurologically nourished by words, by the meaning and reality that words express. We live in a kingdom of words. In John 4, Jesus and his disciples were on a journey. They went into town to get food because everybody was hungry.

They came back, and Jesus was in a spiritual conversation with a Samaritan woman.

“Meanwhile his disciples urged him, ‘Rabbi, eat something.’ But he said to them, I have food to eat that you know nothing about. Once again, this is not just a pretty saying; Jesus was talking about what is real. He is feasting on the presence and love and meaning of his Father in obedience to his Father.

In the marshmallow experiment, the key to the outcome is what researchers call the strategic allocation of attention. In other words, if you think about the marshmallow, you’re going to eat the marshmallow. If you think about not eating that delicious marshmallow, you’ll eat the marshmallow. If you think about a song you love, you may well be able to not eat the marshmallow! In fasting, I strategically allocate my attention on God. We can do that right now. Take the Word of God into my soul. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. [...] I allow my body’s hunger to remind me I’m not in control. Somebody else is—and that’s good. Fasting is literally feasting on God.

2. Fasting as caring.

A very powerful passage about fasting is in Isaiah 58. People are complaining to God. They keep fasting, praying, and crying out, and God doesn’t seem to notice. He doesn’t give them what they want. So he tells them the problem:

“Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife... [...] Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter.

The rest of that chapter is a powerful connection between the power of fasting, rightly practiced, and passionate justice for the poor, the hungry, and the oppressed. That chapter has inspired movements of social justice for over 2,000 years. Fasting, when it is done to the Lord, is the opposite of self-centered preoccupation with, “Look how pious I am!”

When I’m hungry, my normal response is to think, “How can I satisfy my hunger?” The term, the flesh, can sound like a religious cliche. When you come across it in the Bible, you might think about this character: The Cookie Monster. He has a simple philosophy: “See cookie. Want cookie. Eat cookie.” The Cookie Monster is not big on self-regulation!

We live in a day where, for all our pride and education, a lot of the smartest people in our culture spend their lives trying to convince you that you are nothing more than a

collection of appetites to be gratified, just the cookie monster theory of human nature. They tell you that's all you are. When we do an Isaiah 58 fast, we learn not to be so obsessed with our own appetites. When we do this kind of fast, when our body is hungry, we remember my brothers and sisters who are hungry but have no bread and have no money to buy bread. The temporary and very small pain in my body speaks to me of the ongoing and very large pain in theirs. God begins to grow compassion in me.

I train for compassion. I remember I have money, and I could be generous. I remember the world is bigger than my desires.

Now, maybe God is calling you to give up something besides food. I have a friend who prayed about this. "God, what might I fast from during Lent?" The thought that popped into her mind was, "You could fast from coffee." The next thought was, "No! Not coffee! Anything but coffee!" The next thought was, "Well, obviously, God is calling me to give up coffee because it has a grip on me that it would be good to be free of."

Maybe your fast might involve alcohol. Maybe it's social media, or screens or a cell phone. Maybe it's whatever the thought is that, when it comes to you, you say, "No, not that!"

Ask God to guide. God, you know what our "marshmallows" are. Thank you for making it possible that we can grow steadily into the power of your kingdom.

Chapter 14 - Treasures

POSSESSIONS

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness! No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. ”

Take a little trip in your mind’s eye to the junkyard. Everything in the junkyard now was once, to someone, an object of great value. There was a day when it was bright, shiny, and new, and somebody said, “I want that. I’ll pay money for that!” Then a moth got it, rust got it, a thief got it, got old, and it ended up in the junkyard. It didn’t last. Nobody wants it now. Stuff is that way. All stuff is that way. All the stuff we have now is going to end up in a junkyard. We’re just the middleman. The only difference between the merchandise in a junkyard and the merchandise at Nordstrom, Best Buy, or BMW is time. Treasure is junk waiting to happen. Here’s the formula, here it is: junk equals treasure plus time.

There was an ad for an expensive watch that said, “You never actually own a [this brand of watch]. You merely look after it for the next generation.” The platinum version (no kidding) of this particular watch sold then for \$1,230,000. That’s for a watch that will one day end up in a junkyard. A friend of mine named Roy is in the junkyard business. He wrote a book called *Junkyard Wisdom*, which talks about how to deal with wealth as a follower of Jesus.¹

His family was a junkyard family. He told me amazing stories about people looking for treasure in a junkyard. His uncle, who was also a junkyard guy, told him about buying a junk car for \$50 and finding a Stradivarius violin in the trunk. Roy thinks this story may be dubious, but it makes the point that we are treasure-loving, treasure-hunting people.

One man walked into the office and told Roy’s dad that his old junker car was outside and that he would sell it for a few bucks. Roy’s dad said, “Yeah.” It was a busy day, so it wasn’t till the end of the day he asked Roy to pull the car around back. Roy turned the

key, but nothing happened. He figured the battery was dead. It was no problem because most of the value of a junk car is selling off the engine for parts. He lifted up the hood and found there was no engine. The man had stolen his own engine before he sold the car.

Junk is just treasure plus time. That beautiful car is going to end up in somebody's junkyard. That watch, that table, those clothes... You can get a Sub-Zero refrigerator for a fortune. It's still just junk waiting to happen. I read one consumer advocate who said Sub-Zero is actually the IQ of a person who would spend that much money on a refrigerator.

There are some religious traditions that say our problem is we have desires, so we get attached to stuff. That leads to suffering, so we should learn not to desire anything at all—that the road to the good life actually is the elimination of all desires. But Jesus does not say you shouldn't have treasures. People sometimes misunderstand Christianity as being anti-treasure, but Jesus' claim here is that everybody has treasures. Human beings are, by their nature, treasuring creatures—God made us that way. A treasure is what you seek to keep because of the value you place on it.

We see this in little human beings. Small children will treasure a stuffed animal or a ratty, old blanket. Their little soul gets wrapped around it. It doesn't have to be valuable financially. When we were growing up, my sister loved her doll, Pandy. Barbie has kept it for 60 years now, and most recently, she gave it to her granddaughter. Pandy was not an attractive doll, not even after reconstructive surgery at a doll hospital in San Diego. She is actually one creepy looking little doll. To me, she should be in the junkyard. To this day, she scares me, but she is somebody's treasure. By the way, you are somebody's treasure.

We will come back to that.

Nothing degrades a person (a child or an adult) more than to scorn their treasure. Even somebody experiencing homelessness, in prison, or maybe in a concentration camp may still have a letter or an old photo that, to them, is a treasure. If somebody you love dies, some worthless article of clothing or a pair of old tennis shoes becomes a treasure to you.

The Greek word for treasure in this passage of Jesus' teaching is the word *thesaurus*, and it means a treasure trove, a treasure store, of words and meaning. Our lives are meant to be treasure stores of meaning. Jesus uses a variation of that word for treasure five times in the first few sentences of this text. So don't feel bad about treasuring. Jesus doesn't say, "Don't treasure anything." He says, "Don't treasure the wrong thing. Don't wrap your eternal heart around earthly treasures." Not because they're bad but because they

won't last. They are temporary. Moth, rust, something's gonna get them. It's going to wear out, give out, burn out, rust out, run out. Eventually, it's going to be out. But not you, you'll never be out. Jesus said what is most real is what is unseen, beginning with our unseen Heavenly Father. Physical stuff is just physical stuff. It's just atoms and molecules put together. It's not a treasure until it is treasured by a person, a treasurer. That's you. You are a treasurer-by God's design. Everybody has treasures, and that means everybody has to find a treasure strategy.

A lot of people today are what we call market timers. They will watch the stock market for signs that the market is going to drop, and then they reinvest in safer options. IBM (Big Blue) first got listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 1915. Question: If you had acquired one share of its stock on that day in 1915, how much would you be worth today? The answer is: If you bought one share of IBM stock in 1915, you would be dead today, so you would be worth nothing today! We have a way of forgetting this-but Jesus never does. People always want to time the stock market. Buy low; sell high.

Here's what you need to know about treasuring: Jesus is the ultimate market timer. There are two markets: one is temporary, the other is eternal. Jesus is bearish on the earthly market, but he is extremely bullish about the heavenly one. Long before Jesus, the writer of Proverbs wrote, "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; do not trust your own cleverness. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle." A more recent version of this wisdom is a little poem called "Money Talks."

That money talks,
I'll not deny.
I heard it once.
It said, "Goodbye. "²

Jesus gives the greatest investment tip of all time: "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven..." The most important command in the Bible is: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

That is, treasure God above all. Love him. Worship him. Think about him. Delight in him. Meditate on him. Adore him. Thank him. Serve him. Prize him. Surrender to him. You cannot treasure God too much. And any strategy for investing that revolves around earthly treasures is a bad investment strategy.

I read this analogy some time ago from Randy Alcorn, and it was quite helpful to me. Imagine that you check into a room at Motel 6. You are not content with your room, so you go to Bed, Bath, and Beyond and buy the world's greatest towels for the bathroom.

You go to an art gallery and buy expensive paintings for the walls. You get a really expensive mattress. You get a widescreen, high-def TV. It's rare that people spend huge amounts of money to redecorate their hotel rooms. Why? Well, you're going to check out soon. This is the number one rule in the hotel room game. People check out really quickly. Why would you invest huge resources into something when you're going to check out shortly? Any idea where this is headed?

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth..." Jesus says, "The eye is the lamp of the body" "The idea is that to live well in God's kingdom, we need to see the worth of things clearly. Greed, consumerism, chronic discontent, and lack of generosity make me look at the world wrong. Instead of looking at what I have and being grateful, instead of looking at people in need and being generous, instead of looking at God and being confident, I look at what others have who have more than I do, and I get envious. That's the darkness.

There's an old parable that's attributed to the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. Thieves break into a jewelry store, but instead of taking anything, they just switch the price tags. The next day, no one knows the real value of anything. People spend a fortune to acquire something that's worthless.

A long time ago, Nancy and I were in an antique shop. I had our young baby in a backpack on my back. Nancy was eight months pregnant with another child. Nancy told me, "Be careful. This shop is filled with expensive items-I can tell from the price tags. I know you," Nancy said to me. "You will start reading some old book and forget about the baby. She'll knock something off the shelf, and it will break. You will have to pay for it out of your allowance if that happens for the rest of your life." I said, "I think I can handle a baby, thank you very much." A little while later in the shop, I was reading an old book, and the baby lunged. Nancy heard it and whirled around, but because her person—her middle section—was much larger than it normally was, her stomach knocked off a very expensive vase from a shelf. It cost a lot of money—coming out of her allowance, but it gave me a certain satisfaction.

Here's the deal. All day long, we walk through this world filled with what God treasures most, and that is people. Deuteronomy says, "For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob [that is, Israel] his allotted inheritance." Other gods in the ancient world used people. The God of the Bible treasures people. God is so determined to treasure you that he sent his Son Jesus to live, to teach, and then to die on a cross for you. Every human being has an invisible price tag: eternal, image of God, worth the life of God's Son. Who switched the price tags? Life in the Kingdom of God means treasure people and use money. Life in the kingdom of earth means treasure money, and use people. We all want to be treasured.

My wife was cleaning out some old stuff a while back, and she brought down some of her calendars I had never seen. One of them was from 1981. On August 14, 1981, in her calendar, we looked together where it said, “Greg and Bonnie Speck, John Ortberg.” That was the night we met on a blind date. I was in her book before I’d ever met her. Then she had our next date written down, along with where we went and what we did. In those early months, if I called her, she’d write down in her calendar, “John called.” I’d never read this in 30-plus years. The first time I told her I loved her was on a picnic in the spring. On that day, in her calendar were three letters: “ILU.”

Every human heart needs to be treasured. Everyone does! This is not restricted to romantic love. God treasures you: married, single, divorced, separated, rich, poor, black, white, atheist, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, gay, straight, young, old, happy. The God of the universe treasures you. Then there is this profound advice, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Be careful about what you invest your treasure in because whatever it is, your heart will get wrapped up in it. The good news is we can use our money to send it into those areas where we want our hearts engaged because our hearts follow our money.

My favorite story about this is about our first sofa. Early in our marriage, we sold my old Volkswagen Super Beetle. With that money, we bought a mauve sofa. It was actually pink, but for that kind of money, it was mauve. When the man at the sofa store found out we had three children, all under the age of five, he said to us, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures in a mauve sofa where children can eat and spill, and the dog will stain. But store up for yourselves a brown sofa where nobody will ever notice.” But we did not listen to him. We got the mauve sofa. Want to guess what our number one rule was? “Don’t sit on the mauve sofa. Don’t use the mauve sofa. Don’t touch the mauve sofa. Don’t look at the mauve sofa. Don’t think about the mauve sofa. On every other chair in the house, you may freely sit, but upon this sofa, the mauve sofa, you may not sit. For on the day you sit thereupon, you will surely die.”

Then, one day came the fall, and there was on the mauve sofa a stain, a red stain, a red jelly stain. Nancy lined up our children and asked them, “Who put the stain on the mauve sofa?” I knew none of them would ever tell. They just sat there in silence because they had never seen their mom so mad. I knew none of them would tell because they knew if they did, they would spend eternity in the timeout chair. I knew none of them were going to say anything because I was the one who put the stain on the mauve sofa, and I sure wasn’t going to say anything. The day we brought it home, that mauve sofa was the greatest treasure in our house. To tell you the truth, we got rid of that sofa a long time ago. But the kids are still around.

Stuff is temporary; junk is treasure plus time. People are eternal. If you invest your money in the Kingdom of God, sponsor a child who doesn’t have money for food,

sponsor a classroom at an under-resourced school, help build a house through Habitat for Humanity. Help somebody who is currently homeless; your heart will go there.

I asked a very generous person, “What did you do when you were starting out to help you lay up treasure in heaven?” He said he and his wife decided a long time ago to live by what is sometimes called the 10-10-80 plan. He recommends this to everybody who is just starting out in life. The idea is to take the first 10 percent of your income and give it straight to God. In the Bible, “the tithe” is the first 10 percent. Do it right off the top. Then, take the next 10 percent and put it into savings. First, you pay God, and then you pay you. Create an emergency fund, and then begin to prepare for retirement. Then, use the remaining 80 percent to live on.

When Jesus says to store up treasure in heaven, remember, heaven isn’t just someplace out there where you’re gonna go after you die. The kingdom of heaven is right here, and you begin to have treasure-generosity, meaningfulness, joy-right here, right now. If you have kids, teach them the 10-10-80 plan.

Model it for them.

Don’t wrap your heart around earthly treasures. It’s all going to end up in the junkyard.

That’s why Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. ”Money is a good tool but a bad master. It’s a good tool to use in seeking to be a part of God’s quest to make the world a better place.

You’ll be shaped by whatever you treasure. If you treasure money, you’ll be shaped by greed. If you treasure security, you’ll be shaped by fear. If you treasure approval, you’ll be shaped by reputation. If you treasure success, you’ll be shaped by achievement. If you treasure physical appearance, you will be shaped by vanity. If you treasure power, you will be shaped by arrogance. If you treasure God, you will be shaped by love.

If you find yourself worried about money-not having enough, not being able to pay your bills, not being able to educate the kids, cost of living worries, retirement worries- or if you worry about anything else at all, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives the most staggering, profoundly life-changing advice on anxiety management ever in human history.

We turn to that in the next chapter.

Chapter 15 - Good News For Worriers

ANXIETY

When I was a kid, I'd worry about school, about taking tests, about what I'd get on my report card, about whether I would get in trouble. "What if my parents find out?" I remember thinking what a great thing it must be to be an adult because when you're an adult you don't really have to worry about anything anymore. But as I got a little older, I still worried-about losing at tennis, about where I'd go to college and if I'd make friends, what I should do for a living, and whether I would live up to my potential (whatever that might be). I worried about ever meeting a girl who wanted to marry me-who I wanted to marry.

Then one did.

Then I worried if we'd ever have a child. Then we did. When that little child was born, I realized I had everything I wanted; now that I was a parent, I would never worry again. That lasted about 10 seconds, then I realized that little baby was 8 pounds of non-stop worry. I thought, "Now I'm going to have to worry about this little kid for the next 18 years!" But I was wrong. After 18 years, the kid went away-but the worry stayed behind.

Worry is not my friend. Worry tries to get me to live in a future I cannot control and miss the present where I could know gratitude. Worry is insatiable.

I can worry about not having kids and worry about kids but having them turn out badly. They are mutually incompatible outcomes, but I can worry about them both. I have a finite capacity to live but an infinite capacity to worry.

Worry is relentlessly joy-killing. There won't be enough. You're not going to make it. The bubble is going to burst. You're disappointing people. Worry gets me to say, "But what if?" rather than, "I can face anything through Christ who strengthens me." Worry will say, "If only..." rather than, "In all things, give thanks." Worry is sneaky.

My brow is furrowed. Nancy asks me, "What are you worried about?" "I'm worried about this sermon; I'm worried about this book I'm working on." "What's it about?" "About the passage where Jesus says not to worry about anything." "You're worried about how to teach people that they never need to worry?" "Yes, what's your point?"

Jesus hates what worry does to people. How it makes us small, timid, mean, chokes joy, kills dreams, and steals our days one hour at a time. Jesus hates worry, but he loves worriers. He has great compassion for people who worry. It may be that anxiety is a crushing enemy for you. Sometimes, we can feel worse when we worry because people

will tell us that worry is a lack of faith in God, and then we worry about not having enough faith.

One of our daughters has dealt with chronic, often severe, anxiety since she was six years old. One of my great regrets as a parent was how long it took me to recognize that. She does not lack faith. She is a hero to me. She (and maybe you) has to fight an inner battle nobody outside of her body can ever fully understand, but God knows. God cares. Jesus does not say these words to add to your burden. He wants to lighten it. So let's look at them:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.””

A quite brilliant Christian thinker, Rosenstock-Huessy, writes about how to locate our lives in the reality Jesus describes here. Life beyond worry, one day at a time. He says we live at the intersection of the past and the future. We all remember what is behind us, and we do that with either gratitude or regret. We anticipate a future. We do that with either hope or with fear.¹

The only place we can find God is in this moment, right now. Regret will try to make you live in the past. Fear and anxiety will try to make you live in the future. God calls us to live in this moment. We are creatures who live in time. We're also creatures who occupy space. Again, when it comes to space, we live at the intersection of two worlds: our inner world (in our minds) and our outer world (the great world God created). In our minds, there is this unceasing flow of thoughts and feelings. Our inner world is an amazing gift.

Then we engage with an outer world—with objects in nature and especially people. The whole world is God's gift. We were made by God to dwell in our inner world with

peace. “And the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds...” We’re made to engage in the outer world with love. “For God so loved the world...”

You live at the intersection of the past and the future, at the intersection of where our inner world meets our outer world. You live at the center of this cross. You live what he calls a cruciform life-3, life in the shape of the cross. You could picture time as a horizontal line and the inner and outer world as a vertical line. Where they intersect, they make a cross that’s right here, right now. You can’t live in the past. You can’t live in the future. You can only live in this place called now. Then another now, and then another now. We take them for granted, but we don’t manufacture them. Every now is a miracle.

Somebody once asked Augustine, “If in the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth, what was God doing before the beginning?” Augustine said God was creating hell for people who ask questions like that. He was only joking because God loves it when people ask questions. God designed us to ask questions. We are made to remember the past with gratitude, to anticipate the future with hope, to dwell in peace in our hearts, and to engage our world in love.

That’s the cross-shaped life, the cruciform life. That’s why the most important word in this passage is the first one: therefore. “Therefore I tell you, do not worry...” Why is the therefore there for? To tell us: Don’t worry, not because worry is unpleasant (although it is). Not because it will hurt your body (although it will). Don’t worry because we live in a God-made, God-breathed, God-soaked, God-watched, God-loved world. Your cross-shaped life is safe in God’s hands. “Look at the birds.”

One spring, while we were living in the Midwest, Nancy and I were driving, and we came across a family of Canada geese along the side of the road while we were driving. There were two adults and nine tiny, fuzzy, little yellow goslings. Nancy had to stop and say to the kids, “Look at how the babies and the daddy are eating while the mommy watched over them all.” I said to her, “How do you know the mommy is watching? Maybe it’s the daddy watching. You don’t know geese that well.” She said, “No, no. It’s always the same in every species. The mommy gives up her own well-being to sacrifice for the family while the daddy just stuffs his face.”

Then the adult geese switched off! The one that had been eating started watching, and the one that had been watching started eating. I was so grateful to God-I knew that was a Holy Spirit moment! Then, both adults started to eat, and nobody was watching the kids, which kind of proves the point because Jesus says God is continually at play in delighting over taking care of his world, even the birds.

We have a dog named Baxter that we love. We feed him. He is a yellow lab so he is always so grateful. “I can’t believe you’re still here! I can’t believe you feed me. You

love me so much. I love you. Do you love me?" What Jesus is saying is it's like that with God and all of his creatures. We do not live in a machine. Every time a hummingbird swoops in for nectar, every time a daisy pops out of the ground, God is being generous.

Jesus hasn't even gotten to us yet! Jesus would go on to say in Luke 12:6-7, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. [...] Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. "Now, when you look at people today, If you were to calculate their worth in sparrows, how many sparrows would it take?

You might be tempted to think, "I don't see much evidence of God taking care of me. I don't have the life, the job, the home, or the money I want. I rarely have a good day." So, a good question for us to consider is: What does it take for you to have a really good day? Because this is the day God made, this is the day between the past and the future.

I'll tell you about my best friend's best day. Chuck had cancer several decades ago now. Chemo was very hard, but he made it through. One month later, he went in for his first checkup, and the lab results showed the cancer was back as bad as before the treatment. That day was his worst day—that day, he knew he was going to die. The hospital called the next morning. A lab technician had mistakenly switched Chuck's results with the lab tests of another person who had not even started treatment yet. Chuck was actually cancer-free. Since Chuck is a doctor, they asked him, "Do you want us to call the lab technician in so you can yell at him?" Chuck said, "Yell at him? I want to kiss him!" That day (the day after Chuck found out he was not going to die, that he could raise his children, that he could love his wife) was Chuck's best day!

What happened? Outwardly, what did he gain? Nothing. He didn't win the lottery. He didn't get promoted. He didn't inherit a fortune. He didn't become famous—or buy a new house. He just got another day to do the same things he did every day. He ate the same breakfast, kissed the same wife goodbye, drove the same old car to the same old job. He came home to the same old house and had dinner at the same old table. Only now, he knew there was nothing ordinary about ordinary. Nothing usual about usual.

Oh, earth, earth, earth, doesn't anybody ever realize how wonderful you are? Nope! A few saints and poets, maybe. You're going through life thinking, "God doesn't really care for me. I'm stuck in the same old job, driving the same old car, kissing the same old spouse." I'll tell you something, friend. Somewhere out there, there is somebody who would love to be working at your old job, or driving your old car, or even kissing your old spouse. Maybe you're not married, or you don't have a job, or you don't have a car. It is still true. There are people who, if they could be in your place, would consider this the greatest day in their life. But we don't see it. The birds do. The flowers do. Not us.

Jesus says, “My advice to you would be don’t worry because, in light of the eternal future in the kingdom, you have nothing to worry about.”

I’ll never forget the night more than two decades ago when I got a call from my wife. She was at a fitness center where we were members. She had brought our child with her, and our child was missing. This place was huge (weight rooms, basketball courts, pools, snack areas). Nancy had searched everywhere. Nothing. The staff searched. Nothing. I’d better come. I got in the car. I made a little deal with myself, “These stories usually turn out okay.” I would not worry on the drive. I wouldn’t worry unless, when I got there, the police were there. I got there, and the police were there. There were two squad cars, lights flashing. I started to panic. My imagination went into overdrive. I went inside. There was a full search going on. There was a small room in the basement of this place with a giant, overstuffed chair really close to the wall. Our small child had wandered in, climbed into that chair, and could not be seen unless you walked right up to the wall and looked. When Nancy finally got there and saw that little body, she didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, hug, or punish. “Honey! Weren’t you terrified? You were so lost!” The kid said, “I wasn’t lost. I always knew right where I was.” In that moment, I was so profoundly grateful for the gift of life. Our child was alive. That’s a gift. I was grateful that I knew in the future, as a parent, when I would mess up and Nancy would call me on it, I had something to use against her for the rest of her life. “You lost our child!?” Here’s Jesus’ teaching: You don’t have to be nervous. You are sitting in an overstuffed chair in God’s universe.

There is an old, old song, and the lyrics go like this:

I sing because I'm happy.
I sing because I'm free.
His eye is on the sparrow.
(They're sold five for two pennies, you know.)
And I know he watches me.

Remarkable promises in the Bible make the same claim.

“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

“Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me.”

“God is our refuge and strength...”

“But my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

“Be not afraid, neither be dismayed: for the Lord your God is with thee.”

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ”

In other words, ultimately, eternally, all will be well. Your need for a good future was placed in you to lead you to the God who alone holds the future in his hands. This is what Jesus says. This is his claim. Things are not just better than you think. They are infinitely better. Things will not just turn out well. They will turn out indescribably, inconceivably well! Pain, suffering, injustice and death will not just be redeemed; they will be gloriously redeemed.

Now, if you’re ready to give life beyond worry a try, Jesus has an invitation. It’s not, “Don’t worry.” That just crushes us. We can’t not worry by trying really hard not to worry. Worry is not a sin. People may choose to disobey our God with greed, lust, pride or deceit or rage, but nobody says, “God, I’m going to defy you so I can fill my days with chronic anxiety, and panic.”

If you wrestle with worry, don’t add guilt to it. No, what Jesus does is give an invitation. “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness... ” Make it your top priority to get in on what God is doing and to have his kind of goodness shape your character. Study God. Love God. Follow God. Serve God.

Think about God.

Be preoccupied with God.

Surrender to God.

Give like God.

Find him in this moment. Hear him in everybody’s voice. See him in each person’s face. Watch him at work with the birds and the flowers.

In particular, Jesus says here (and elsewhere in the Bible), do this one day at a time. “Give us this day our daily bread. ” Live at the center of the cross, right here, right now. Not tomorrow. It’s when we look at the future that we get overwhelmed.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said every year, the average American will eat 1,996 pounds of food. Imagine going into a room that had all the food you were going to eat over the course of a lifetime. That’s 42,000 pounds of dairy, 14,000 pounds of beef and poultry, 7,000 pounds of butter and fat. If somebody sat me down in a warehouse

and told me I had to eat all of that food, I would be overwhelmed-and yet we will all do it!

How? What's our secret to putting away 75 tons of food? Here it is: We eat it one day at a time. How will you face all the heartbreak life will hold for you? How will you deal with all the problems? How will you handle all the disappointment, process all that grief? One day at a time.

We generally think the answer to anxiety is to have less bad stuff happen to us. Sometimes, people think, "If I become a Christian and follow Jesus, then God is supposed to make sure I'm protected from bad things. As long as I believe hard enough, that's his job." Jesus does not say that. He doesn't teach, "Don't worry about tomorrow because if you have enough faith, tomorrow everything is going to be good." What he says is, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. "

Here is Jesus' prediction: Trouble. When? Today! What about tomorrow? Trouble then too! What about terrible things that happened in my past? Well, we don't minimize them or deny them or spiritualize over them. We protest, we lament, we recognize, we grieve.

The great researcher on gratitude in our day is Robert Emmons. He teaches at the University of California, Davis, and is a follower of Jesus. He talks about what he calls the redemptive twist. Oddly, often, the most painful seasons we go through end up creating community, connection, growth, or meaning for which were the most thankful. If we live cruciform lives, our past is not finished yet. Another way of saying it is what happens in the future can change the way we understand our past.²

It was on a Friday that a cross entered the consciousness of the world in a new way because Jesus was hung on it. For his friends on that Friday, it was the worst day of their lives. On the next day (Saturday), that Friday was still God awful. Then came Sunday. Easter Sunday. Resurrection Sunday. What happened on Sunday transformed forever the way they understood Friday. On Sunday, tragic Friday, God-awful Friday became Good Friday.

On Sunday, human history got divided into two sections: BC and AD (what happened before Christ and what happened after his death and resurrection). Now, I'll give you a sentence that has helped me with problems for a long time. Many years ago, I faced a time of deep worry and sadness. The details are not all mine to tell, but it was a situation of gut-level raw pain that involved my family and those I love most and my life ministry calling in ways that I could not ever see being redeemed.

I wasn't actively suicidal, but I remember thinking, "If my life were to end today, I'd be kind of relieved not to be in this pain. I wouldn't mind." I was seeing a counselor. I was on antidepressants to be able to keep functioning. I told one or two people closest to me about the situation, and they expressed deep empathy. "It must be hard. We'll pray."

Then I decided I would tell Dallas Willard; I looked to him as a spiritual mentor. I laid out the whole situation, then I waited over the phone for the words of sympathy I knew would come. I waited for him to say, "I feel your pain. How hard this must be!" He didn't say anything like that. There was a long pause and then 11 words: "This will be a test of your joyful confidence with God." "Well, thank you, Dallas. Why don't we have a test of your joyful confidence in God?"

He was exactly right. That's just what it was. I have lived with that sentence dozens of times a day. Thousands of times, I thought about it. The Serenity Prayer says it so well: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." In the longer version of the serenity prayer, it goes on, "...living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace..."

When I would try to imagine or project into the future, anxiety would always win. So I have had to learn to concentrate on just this day. Strength for today. Manna for today. The cruciform life. Much of that journey for me involved having a few people with whom to share it. When it comes to anxiety, never worry alone. We are wired to receive life from other people when we're anxious or afraid.

One more Baxter story. Baxter is intentionally relational. Baxter loves to be with. Baxter thinks he is a lap dog even though he's a big dog that weighs 60 or 65 pounds. He is not allowed on the sofa because he sheds five pounds of hair a day. So, we got a blanket for Baxter, and he is only allowed to be on the sofa with us if he's on the blanket. What happened over time is this: As soon as we get on the sofa, Baxter goes for the blanket, drags the blanket to the sofa, and begins to get up on the sofa with us. He wants to be with. He wants to live face-to-face. He wants his face to be as close to our faces as it possibly can.

When you worry, go for the blanket. When the valley comes, when you're worried, go for the blanket. Never worry alone, for there is a Father who feeds birds and dresses flowers. You live a cruciform life-remembering the past gratitude, anticipating the future in hope, dwelling in a heart full of peace, engaging with our world in love. When the troubles come, and they will come, they will be a test of your joyful confidence in God.

Chapter 16 - Judge Not

JUDGEMENT

This chapter is not complicated. It is based on a very brief passage of Scripture, and our focus is on one single command-just a few words. “Do not judge...” This is one of those places where I think of the old King James Version.

“Thou shalt not judge.”

You could try saying that out loud with your index finger out if you want to because that kind of helps. You don’t have a problem being judgmental, but other people do. I know. It’s funny how sneaky judgmentalism is. I can start feeling judgmental toward people when I’m saying, “Thou shalt not judge.” It’s kind of fun to point my finger at other people.

How many exceptions does Jesus allow? Based on their personality (which drives you crazy), their faults (which are many and deep), their weird religious beliefs (which you know are all wrong), their sexuality, their sexual orientation, their politics, their tattoos, or their sheer unlikability, about what kind of people does Jesus say, “Of course you can condemn them. Of course they merit condemnation.” Nobody! No exceptions, no loopholes.

He doesn’t say, “You know, try not to make a habit of judging,” or “Don’t judge somebody unless they really have it coming to them, then, of course, let them have it.” Jesus says in the kingdom, there’s a zero-tolerance policy for a judgmental spirit. In fact, Jesus got in trouble for his refusal to be judgmental toward people who everybody else (especially religious leaders) judged.

We’re told religious leaders said this: “But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Where people expected Jesus to give judgment and condemnation because they thought that would be the moral thing to do, Jesus brought welcome and acceptance. In fact, Jesus uniformly extended non-judgmental acceptance to the ethnic rejects; to the religious heretics, the pagans and the Samaritans; to the sexually scandalous; to the corrupt and traitorous tax collectors; to the unclean, untouched lepers. The only people Jesus condemned, interestingly enough, were religious leaders who condemned other people in the name of God. To those religious leaders who passed judgment, Jesus said... “I know you Pharisees burnish the surface of your cups and plates so they sparkle in the sun, but I also know your insides are maggoty with greed and secret evil. Stupid Pharisees! [...] I’ve had it with you! [...] Frauds! [...] You’re just like unmarked graves. [...]’ One of the religious scholars spoke

up: ‘Teacher, do you realize that in saying these things you’re insulting us?’ He said, ‘Yes, and I can be even more explicit.’¹

Jesus was incredibly nonjudgmental with sinners of every kind, with this one exception: people who judged others. Thou shalt not judge. In fact, this flows out of the very purpose of Jesus. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” In fact, Jesus is so opposed to condemnation that we’re told, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” Not a little condemnation. Not trace elements. None. This is not widely understood in our day. Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth was to overthrow the spirit of condemnation and judgmentalism and bring acceptance to all of humanity. His practice was to refuse to engage in judging and offer instead welcome and acceptance even at great, ultimate, personal cost.

His teaching was, “Do not judge. Thou shalt not judge.” Therefore, based on the life and teachings of Jesus, Christians, the church must be the least judgmental place on earth. If Christians are known for anything, it has to be this: radically inclusive, non-judgmental, grace-offering community. Soul healing, fear-melting, and misfit-embracing irrational acceptance.

The plan is for people have got to say, “You know, I have dark secrets. I’d be afraid to tell this to my therapist, to the people at my bar, to my 12-step group, to my best friend, or to my dog because they might judge me. But I know I can say this about myself in the church because I know that’s a place where nobody judges.”

If you meet a stranger sitting next to you on a bus or an airplane and it looks like they might have some problems (maybe they’re heavily tattooed, heavily pierced, heavily drinking), the first thing you should tell them is, “I’m a religious person,” so they will say, “I’m so glad. I’m so messed up financially, emotionally, sexually, morally, relationally. I was afraid I was going to sit next to somebody who might judge me, but now that I know you’re a religious person, I will tell you everything because I know this will be a safe place.”

How are religious people doing at being non-judgmental? How about Christians? Researcher Dave Kinnaman wrote a book recently about how the primary characteristic non-Christians associate with Christians is being judgmental. And that in the face of Jesus’ teaching, “Thou shalt not judge.” Sometimes, Christians try to justify that by saying, “Well, the real problem isn’t really Christians. It’s just that non-Christians don’t want to be confronted with hard moral truth.” Well, maybe. But it is ironic that Jesus was, when people met him, the holiest man they had ever met and also the most non-judgmental human being they had ever encountered. Maybe the word holy means something different than a lot of people think.

“Thou shalt not judge.” We must abandon the deeply-rooted practice of blaming and condemning others, even ourselves. Matthew 7 is all about how people mess up, our relating patterns, and then how “relationship” actually works in the Kingdom of God. No more of what Dallas Willard would call condemnation or engineering to control other people. This does not mean we have to give up making moral discernments or give up being wise.

If I go to a dentist and the dentist checks out my mouth and says, “I see your gums are receding. I see a cavity or two. It looks like you maybe have not been flossing,” that’s the dentist’s job. He is not condemning me as a person.

Suppose my dentist were to say, “You idiot. I have seen better-looking teeth in a comb. They are yellow, disgraced, and disgusting. I... I might want to switch dentists at that point.

In our families and workplaces, relationships, homes, we must discern right from wrong. We will sometimes need to hold people accountable, discuss their failures, and maybe even assign penalties where that’s appropriate without attacking their worth or forgetting their dignity as human beings. You do not have to be naive or gullible to be nonjudgmental. I got a call not long ago from my younger brother, Bart. Bart has always been a trusting soul. Many years ago, he had been staying at my house. We had some really nice patio furniture. One day, I was gone. He was home. When I got home, the patio furniture was gone. I asked my brother about it, and he said, “Oh yeah, the men came and said they were here to pick up the patio furniture.” I said, “What men?” It turns out strangers had come and literally stolen our patio furniture while my brother watched them. He reminded me about that and then told me that this week, some strangers came to the office where he works.

They said to him, “We’re here to check the fire equipment.” He said, “Fine,” and signed off on their receipt so the bill would get paid. It was a complete scam! They were thieves. Nobody is sending bills to check fire equipment at an office. That’s why we would never let Bart watch our children. Total strangers could come. “We’re here to pick up the kids.” “Okay. Let me know if I can help you.”

“Do not judge...” does not mean being naive or gullible; it also does not mean that you have to put up with being mistreated. My wife has a cousin who is a total character. He sent her a text one time that read, “If you want to know who loves you more—your spouse or your dog, lock them both up in the closet when you leave in the morning. When you come home and let them out, see which one is happiest to see you?” That’s not the idea.

The judging Jesus forbids means a spirit of condemnation and rejection.

Indulging my desire to want to feel superior to you. I don't want to think about your humanity. I want that sharp twinge of pleasure that comes with expressing contempt toward you.

We're learning how to live in the kingdom of God. In this world, we are trained to pass judgment as a way of trying to control others. We often do it without even thinking about it, without words. Have you ever had somebody in another car on the road pass judgment on you? They can do it with a single eyebrow or a single look.

So, if judging is something the Bible generally (and Jesus in particular forbids), if it damages other people and corrodes our spirit, why would anybody want to do that? I think the main reason is it's kind of fun. We do it recreationally. You will notice religious people, in particular, have a problem with being judgmental, and often, the more devout their religiosity, the more judgmental they become. Sometimes, we become judgmental toward people we're jealous of because we're afraid they might actually be having more fun, having more of the good life, than we are. We don't like that.

One of Jesus' most unforgettable portraits of judgmentalism is the parable of the prodigal son. You remember the younger boy going off and squandering his inheritance in reckless living. Then, he comes to his senses and returns home. His father rejoices, but not the older brother. The older brother says to the father:

"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you... " This is the resentful, judgmental spirit. ..and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him!"

This is a brilliant portrait of a judgmental spirit. He says to his dad, "But when this son of yours..." not, "This brother of mine." Love always identifies with. Judgment always distances from. "... this son of yours..." And then he says, "squandered your property with prostitutes,"... earlier in the story, Jesus never said anything about prostitutes. The older brother just made that up. His mindset is, "I'm afraid I'm really missing out. I'm afraid the good life is just having as much pleasure, sex, alcohol, partying as you can. That's what I would do if I could, but I can't because I'm such a good boy. So if he gets to have all that fun and gets to come home and be with the father too, that wouldn't be fair."

Sometimes, self-righteous Christians will just pretend, "We're above earthly pleasures and fleshly desires. We are superior." The reality is that, at least for a season, sin is fun. That is why people sin. Pastor Craig Groeschel puts it like this: "If sin isn't fun, you are

not doing it right.” That’s not in the Bible. Religious people often get self-righteous and judgmental because we’re afraid we’re missing out.

The television show *The Simpsons* features Ned Flanders, an evangelical Christian neighbor of Homer and Marge. He says one time, he and his wife had just been away to a Christian camp where they were learning how to be more judgmental. His wife says, “I don’t judge Homer and Marge. That’s for a vengeful God to do.” In our day, we are trained to be judgmental. And now it’s not just religious people; it’s all around us.

Alain de Botton, a philosopher and writer, discusses the difference between the genre of tragedy and modern tabloid journalism, the morally superior posture of modern tabloids, and we might think, often, of social media too. In great tragedies such as *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, the audience identifies with the central character, the tragic hero, and experiences a kind of humility, “That could be me,” and they have more empathy toward others who fall.² Engaging deeply with tragic texts is to be ennobling of the spirit. In modern tabloid journalism or on social media, it’s often just the other way around. We are encouraged to be arrogant, to believe that we are superior to others who have fallen. The posture is, “Can you believe how stupid that politician, that movie star, that CEO or that celebrity was?” Of course, I would never do what they did. It’s just the opposite of the ennobling tendency of great tragic literature. We’re trained in our world, “Can you believe how stupid they are?”

Jesus invites us away from the kingdom of the earth into the reality of the kingdom of the heavens, where we simply lay aside judging, condemning, superiority and blaming.

We have to ask God to help us because we can’t do that on our own.

C.S. Lewis wrote:

“We hear a great deal about the rudeness of the rising generation. I am an oldster myself and might be expected to take the oldsters’ side, but in fact, I have been far more impressed by the bad manners of parents to children than by those of children to parents. Who has not been the embarrassed guest at family meals where the father or mother treated their grown-up offspring with an incivility that, offered to any other young people, would simply have terminated the acquaintance? Dogmatic assertions on matters which the children understand and their elders don’t, ruthless interruptions, flat contradictions, ridicule of things that young take seriously-sometimes of their religion, insulting references to their friends, all provide an easy answer to the question ‘Why are they always out? Why do they like every house better than their home?’ Who does not prefer civility to barbarism?”³

How do I communicate rejection and judgment to my family? I remember when my wife first told me a long time ago that when I get angry at a certain level, my face expresses contempt. I did not want to believe it at first, but it's true. It's in me.

How about at school? How are you doing there? How about at work-with somebody who is difficult for you? Or in your neighborhood? How about when you see somebody who is experiencing homelessness; often, folks just think, "Don't look. It might be awkward; I might feel guilty. Don't convey acceptance of humanity." Part of our human condition is we can't stop sinning by trying to stop sinning. We can't stop being judgmental by trying hard to not be judgmental. We have to ask God to replace a spirit of judgment with genuine acceptance.

Here's the dynamic at work: Jesus says, "For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." He is observing a general law of the human condition, which might be called the law of reciprocity. You tend to get back what you give out. If you give love, you tend to get love. If you give anger, you tend to get anger. If you give distance, you tend to get distance. If you give sarcasm, you tend to get sarcasm. "... with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." So picture in your mind a bucket, and picture a thimble. You decide every day, today, what measure you're going to use. Do you give a bucketful of encouragement to people or a thimbleful? A bucketful of mercy, a bucketful of anger? How about when it comes to judgment? "in the same way you judge... with the measure that you use... "

An important question to ask is: Do I give mercy by the bucket? When I look at other people, do I remember, "They have stories and wounds and scars and genes and parents and hurts. Many things have happened to them that I do not know. "... with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." When I can see past the surface failure, shame, or unloveliness, and instead give somebody an unexpected bucketful of mercy, it can change a life.

In the book *Switch*, the Heath brothers tell a classic story about Tom Watson. He was the CEO of IBM in the 50s and 60s. One of his executives made a business decision that ended up costing the company \$10 million. A lot of money back then. He knew it meant he was in big trouble. He came into Watson's office with a letter of resignation already prepared and said, "I assume I'm here so you can fire me." Watson said, "Fire you? Of course not. I just spent \$10 million educating you; I can't afford to fire you. Get back to work."⁴

After Peter denied Jesus three times and failed him at his moment of greatest need, he meets Jesus after the crucifixion and the resurrection. I imagine Peter saying, "Jesus, I suppose you're going to fire me," and Jesus saying, "Fire you? I just invested a crucifixion and a resurrection business in you. I can't afford to fire you. Get back to

work! Feed my sheep.” Can you imagine the relief and joy that exploded in Peter’s heart? Imagine what the words “Thou shalt not judge” meant to Peter after that day.

I know it’s hard. “There is somebody in my life who has made really bad mistakes and has really hurt me.” But don’t I make mistakes? “There’s somebody in my life who is really unlovable. They’re really cranky.” Am I never unlovable? Am I never mean? If you find yourself wondering (because Christians often do), “Well then, how do I stand up for right without being self-righteous?” The best wisdom I have ever heard here is a phrase from Dallas Willard: Offer gentle non-cooperation with evil.

Dallas used to say the two main elements of job discipleship are, “Do your work really diligently with God’s help” and “Offer gentle non-cooperation with evil.” For many years, I used to wonder what Dallas meant by that phrase. Then I noticed one time it occurred to me after I had known Dallas for quite a while, that not only did Dallas not gossip... Literally, I never saw or heard him gossip. But also, when other people were with Dallas, they didn’t gossip. We just didn’t gossip with him.

I thought about why that is so, and it occurred to me that when you gossip, you do it because you get a little reward from the person with whom you’re gossiping. The other person leans forward a little bit. They listen a little more eagerly. Then, you get a little more excited. You both get a little thrill of gratification by feeling superior to that poor dumb cluck that you’re gossiping about. “Of course, we would never do what they did. Isn’t that too bad? We must pray for them.”

Gossip always involves judgment. What I realized with Dallas is there was literally nothing in him or in his body at the cellular level that would collude with gossip. It’s not that he said, “Thou shalt not gossip.” Possibly, he could have said that more. But if you were to gossip, he would just look a little disinterested or perhaps even a little sad. He wouldn’t ask for more details; you would get no gratification out of it. It was no fun to gossip with Dallas. Remember, If sin isn’t fun, you’re not doing it right. Dallas didn’t do it right.

Sin turns out to be fragile in many ways. One of the ways is that, generally, sin requires collusion to be sustained. And one follower of Jesus who offers gentle non-cooperation with evil can simply stop it, and Dallas did.

If you want to grow in this, ask God to help you live a life of such vitality in the kingdom, sufficient joy of being loved by God and alive in this amazing world where he feeds the birds and dresses the flowers, that sin ceases to be fun.

So we can offer habitual, gentle non-cooperation with evil. You don’t even have to say that’s what you’re doing. You don’t have to say to your gossipy, judgmental co-worker,

“Watch me gently not cooperate with your evil.” It will just be in your body, and it will have an impact on others without them even being able to identify why.

That is the kingdom among us. That is the divine conspiracy which is always hidden. It is Jesus’ way.

Today, now, we’re turning from condemnation in our friendship with Jesus. So we don’t even receive condemnation from other people. We no longer let it in. We still have to receive feedback. If your boss says to you, “Your work in this project was not satisfactory,” don’t say, “Well, you may condemn my work, but the Bible says there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. I repudiate your condemnation.”

I will have to receive feedback, critique, and criticism with humble poise but not be crushed by it. I don’t have to be crushed by condemnation, even when it comes from myself. I ask God to heal my shame so that I can live one moment to the next, in his deep acceptance of me. We just set aside all judgmentalism. Offer love rather than condemnation to our friends and our enemies, parents and children, friends, spouse, ex-spouse, employees, employer, neighbors, the people we serve, the people who serve us.

We enter into a new world of grace.

We experience a new level of joy. We know peace. We find ourselves entering into deeper relational moments because people will open up to those who offer them acceptance and love.

We brood less. We worry less. We think about ourselves less.

We encourage more.

You will be blessed, and you will be a blessing.

Chapter 17 - The Plank And The Speck

HYPOCRISY

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brothers eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take that speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Let’s talk about the speck and the plank. You can divide all the people in the world into two categories: *everybody else* and *you*. Those two circles. So here’s the question: *Which circle are you in charge of?* Well, you’re in charge of *you*. The *you circle*. Which circle are you not in charge of? That would be the *everybody else circle*.

Jesus’ teaching here is not subtle. There are other people’s faults, and then there are my faults. Now, you’d think I would be much more aware of my faults than of others. You’d think I would notice my problems first because they’re my problems—but often, I don’t notice them at all. “Plank? What plank? What are you talking about?” But I have great clarity on your problem. I fail to take responsibility for my life, but I’m great at blaming other people.

We used to have a magnet on our refrigerator that read, “I didn’t say you were wrong; I said I was going to blame you.” Nancy put it there. Do you know what my problem is? My problem is my mother. My problem is my spouse. My problem is I don’t have a spouse. My problem is the place where I work. My problem is I don’t have a place to work. My problem is you. I can see your tiny little problem, but I can’t see my great big problem.

That’s the plank.

I can’t see my problem is me. I cannot see my habit of blaming others, judging, avoiding responsibility. People who go through their whole lives, and they never identify their real problem is them. This is so common that you may be thinking, even right now, about somebody else that you wish were hearing these words because they need it so much. The good news is they are here. The bad news is they are you! We learn to evade responsibility and assign blame when we’re tiny little sinners. A woman and her husband tried to teach their little son about how good God is by asking him questions like, “Who made the sun?”

“God did!”

“Who made that tree?”

“God did!”

“Who made Big Bird?”

“God did!”

One morning, she walked into his room, and it was a disaster. Toys everywhere, clothes on the floor, food hijacked from the kitchen and spilled. She asked the classic parental question: “Who made this mess?”

He said, “God did!”

Where did my children learn how to blame at such an early age? Not from me, that's for sure. When we were toddlers, my sister would take a bath, and the bathroom window would get steamed up. She loved to write on the window, but she knew she'd get in trouble if she got caught. So she would write my initials. She would write my initials, so I would get blamed for her writing on the window. I could do nothing about it then because I was so little—but today, I tell thousands of people about her psychopathic behavior. Who made this mess?

A man I know went to traffic school, where everybody had to tell what violation brought them there. Amazingly, not one of them was responsible for breaking the law. They all had justifications for speeding or for that illegal U-turn. When it got to him, this man said, “I didn't stop at a stop sign. That's why I'm here. I was entirely wrong, and I got caught.” There was a moment of silence, and then everybody in the room actually applauded for the one honest man in traffic school.

Christianity is supposed to be that way. We cheer for people honestly owning their sins. Nobody is perfect. Quit looking at somebody else's speck; start looking at my plank. There's a version of the Serenity Prayer that is pointedly helpful: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know it's me.”

Jesus calls us to focus on the plank in our eye by taking responsibility for our own lives. This reflects how God made us. Genesis says God created human beings. He created them God-like. “Prosper. Reproduce. Fill the earth. Take charge. Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, every living thing that moves on the face of the earth.”

God designed us to be responsible. It is a God-like thing to be responsible, to have a little sphere that's under my dominion. People are actually happiest when they have responsibilities. You have a kingdom. Your life beginning with your body. You're meant to reign over it. How will you spend your time today? You will decide. How will you treat other people today? You will decide. What will your attitude be today? You will decide. What will you fill your mind with? God made people to be responsible, and then he gave only one rule. He said, “But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil...”

But the first man and the first woman do.

Notice what happens. Immediately, God asks Adam, "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" The man said, 'The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it. "A very simple question. Adam could've just said, "Yep. My bad. You gave that commandment to me." But no, Adam throws Eve under the bus. "It's not my fault. It was the woman." It's not just her. "It was the woman you put here." Who made this mess? "God did."

In Milton's Paradise Lost, there's a wonderful, long portrayal of the first man and woman blaming each other. He ends it with the words: "Thus they in mutual accusation spent the fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning; and of their vain contest appeared no end." Were Adam and Eve the last married couple to spend fruitless hours in mutual accusation? Not by a long shot. This does not mean we don't confront each other or speak hard words to each other. The plank is about a spirit of condemnation and blame.

A Pastor named Andy Stanley says that often, when a spouse with a distressed marriage comes to talk to him, all they can talk about is where the other spouse is at fault, how they blame their partner. Andy will say, "You know, clearly, the person who is the real problem isn't here, so here's what I'm going to do. I will draw a circle, and this circle represents 100 percent of the chaos, 100 percent of the pain in your marriage. I want you to draw whatever part of this pie that represents the part for which you are responsible." They will generally draw a slim slice. "This is me. This is how much of the problem is due to me."

Andy will often say, "Well, since they are not here, let's focus on your slice because this is the only slice on which you can really work." Here's what's interesting. In almost every case, Andy says, people cannot do it. They cannot talk about their slice. They keep going back to them, them, them.¹

People get so addicted to complaining about the speck in the other person's eye that they can't see the plank in their own eye. If I focus on being responsible for what I can actually change, what I have been put in charge of, then I will grow. If I focus on my part, my life will grow. My heart will grow. I'll pray, "God, change me, grow me, guide me." What will happen over time is that my kingdom, my dominion will increase.

On the other hand, if I focus on the other person "Here's what they're doing wrong, I blame them), then your problems will grow, your resentment will grow, your negativity will grow, and your kingdom will get a little smaller. Blame is not productive. It wastes energy, it spoils relationships, poisons families, undermines workplaces, violates love. But I can rationalize it so fast!

This does not mean that we ignore social injustice. It doesn't mean we deny when we have been the victim of abuse or betrayal, a problem no one asks for nor can they control. It's simply joining your little kingdom, with all of its limitations, into God's great kingdom.

There was a brilliant Stanford academician, Rene Girard, who was converted to Christianity as an adult by reading about the theme of blame in literature and history. How toxic and destructive it is, and then reading about it in the Bible and seeing how God turned things around. Girard was fascinated by all people, all societies, all cultures, have a custom of scapegoating. Scapegoating is the practice where we find somebody or some group to pin all the blame on, even for things that are not their fault. Girard said it's almost like a safety valve. It's like all the blame for resentment, rivalry, anger gets put on them, so we don't have to own it ourselves.²

One kid in grade school might get picked on because they look different, act different, or they're clumsy or considered unattractive. Nobody votes on this, but somehow, everybody in the class knows they're the scapegoat. A whole movement of family systems theory was developed a few decades ago, that said families very often have scapegoats, the one kid in the family who is the black sheep, who all the problems get blamed on-so Mom and Dad don't have to look at themselves.

Then Girard said often nations have scapegoats. For Hitler, it was, above all, the Jewish people. For Stalin, it was the dissidents. In Rwanda, it was the Tutsi. Scapegoating people means dehumanizing them. In Leviticus, the sixteenth chapter, on the Day of Atonement, the priest would actually have a goat chosen by lot, and it was called the scapegoat. He would put his hands on it, confess the sins of Israel over it, release it into the wilderness. It was a picture of the sins of Israel being removed and forgiven by God. This is where we get the name scapegoat. Girard said that in ancient cultures outside of Israel, sacrifices very often involved human beings-human victims who were sacrificed to placate or appease the gods. They were human scapegoats. All the problems of the society, or the tribe, were pinned on them. The idea was sacrificing them would heal the community. In fact, the idea that scapegoating a victim would heal the community's problem was so deep that the Greek word for the victim who would be sacrificed was pharmakos. We get our word pharmacology from that.

We see this dynamic at work in the Bible in the story of Cain and Abel. Cain, unlike his brother Abel, fails to offer God a proper sacrifice. He is upset and angry, but instead of taking responsibility, he scapegoats his brother and gets rid of him.

Girard noticed something unprecedented happens in the Bible. Stories of blame or scapegoating would be told, but these stories are sympathetic to the victim (to the one

who gets scapegoated). God cares; the God of the Bible cares about the victim. God condemns the acts of people, families, or nations who scapegoat other people. God said the blood of Abel cried to him from the ground.

Joseph's brothers scapegoat Joseph; they get rid of him. They think, "Well, we'll be okay now." But God cares about Joseph. In other words, in the Bible, the ancient universal practice of scapegoating gets named and undermined, begins to collapse, and all of this reaches a climax in the person of Jesus.

He is the holy, innocent One. He is utterly blameless. All the powers that be, the religious leaders, the political leaders, the money changers... they all decide Jesus is their problem. They make Jesus the scapegoat. The man who could have saved him, Pontius Pilate, publicly washes his hands. "Don't blame me. I am innocent of this man's blood."

That's the way we do things—but of course, nobody is innocent except Jesus. On the cross, he lays bare the mechanism, the evil, the violence, the injustice of scapegoating. We're told, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him, who justly judges. 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness.'"

In Christ's love, he absorbs all the sin, hatred, violence, wickedness of the world upon himself on the cross. He makes atonement. In his resurrection, he says, "Now the way of blaming, stigmatizing, condemning, rejection is over."

Jesus has become, against all odds, the great scapegoat, the ultimate scapegoat, the final scapegoat, the one who takes our sins on himself so that we can be forgiven. That is why, in his community, everybody is welcome, precisely while nobody is perfect.

Let's put this into action. "I'm going to focus on the plank in my eye and not the speck in somebody else's eye." That plank (a spirit of condemnation) could be based on somebody else's morality or ethnicity, their behavior, their religious beliefs. It could be generational. Maybe you're older, you see somebody who's younger, and you think, "Why don't they wear something besides jeans and a tee shirt? Why do they have to pierce their bodies? Why do they have to tattoo their skin? Why do they want their music so loud?" Just under the surface is, "Why can't they be more like me?" You end up missing the wonderful spirit of adventure in them, the compassion, idealism, desire to make a difference.

Maybe you're younger, and you see somebody older. You think, "Why do they have to be so formal, so picky, so wrinkly, or so technologically incompetent?" Just under the surface is, "Why can't they be more like me?"

Maybe you're not sure whether you're younger or older. That means...you're older!

The invitation: Stop trying to straighten other people out. A friend of mine says if you want to straighten people out, you ought to work in a funeral home because that's the only place where, when you straighten people out, they stay straightened out. Live people tend to resist straightening. Let go of the practice of straightening. Today, focus on your little slice of the pie.

Instead of automatically getting defensive or trying to justify or excuse, step back. "God, help me," and actually own, "Yep, those are my words. These were my actions." Ask God to help you identify what the plank is that needs to be removed.

The problem isn't just that we have a plank in our eye. The problem is that we don't even notice the plank. So, we need outside help to become aware of the plank. The old language for this is conviction of sin; it is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

It's a gift nobody wants, but it's a gift of the Spirit.

Here is one of my favorite pictures of this: Charles Steinmetz was an electrical engineer in the early twentieth century. There was a story in Life magazine, because Steinmetz was a genius. Henry Ford once called Steinmetz to consult about a problem with a huge electric generator. It wasn't working, and nobody could figure out why. Steinmetz comes to the plant, observes it for two days, climbs a ladder to make an X mark with a piece of chalk on its side.

He told the engineers to remove a plate at that mark and replace 16 windings from the field coil. They did, and lo and behold, it worked! Henry Ford was thrilled until he got a bill from Steinmetz for \$10,000, a ridiculous amount of money way back then. So Ford asked for an itemized bill. Steinmetz then re-sent the bill with two items. One, "Making a chalk mark on generator: \$1." Two, "Knowing where to make the mark: \$9,999." Ford paid the bill.

Every one of us has a plank. Attitude, habit, relationship. "My life is not working right. My character is out of whack. I don't even know why." This is the human condition. The psalmist says, "But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults. "That's the plank we don't notice.

We invite the Holy Spirit to come and make an X on that spot that we don't recognize. Most of us would prefer to go around and make a big X on other people's lives. I'd put the X on you: "Here's where you need to change.

Here's where you need to be different. You know what your problem is? Could I straighten you out?" So I ask God. The idea of the plank is not just, well, I have some shortcoming, and if God will straighten that out, then I can go into the business of straightening you out. No, judgmentalism is my plank; that is my problem.

This may be the greatest relationship prayer that we can pray: "Lord, change me." It's not, "Lord, change him. Change her. Change them. Change it."

Change my attitude, my thoughts, my habits, my envy, my hurry. God, show me where the X goes."

It's all about the speck and the plank. Let go of the speck. Go after the plank.

And in the next chapter, we'll talk about the pearl and the pig.

Chapter 18 - The Pig And The Pearl

DISCERNMENT

Jesus said, “Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces.”

In this passage, we see some people are swine. Some people (unlike you, with your spiritual sensitivity) are evil. They cannot appreciate what is sacred and holy. It's like they have some kind of spiritual disability. You, on the other hand, have pearls: pearls of wisdom, pearls of truth, pearls of good advice, pearls that could straighten people out if only they would receive them, but they're just spiritual clods (maybe they belong to some other religion or they are secular). You should not waste your time on such people. They are not worthy.

That's what Jesus is saying, right? I actually took those words from a quite typical sermon on this passage, from the Sermon on the Mount. Doesn't that kind of seem not really Jesus-y? This business about pearls and pigs is one of his most intriguing sayings of Jesus, and people have often been quite unsure of what they ought to do with it.

A group of little children was once asked to interpret, “What does this saying mean?” Jacob (age 6) said, “I would never give my sister my toys.” That's what he thought: ‘Don't cast your pearls before swine was.’ Is that what Jesus had in mind? “My toys are my pearls, and my sister is the swine.” Once, I was going through a door with a very quick-witted friend who was older than I was. I motioned for him to go first and said, “Age before beauty.” He went first and said, “Pearls before swine.”

Now, here is the problem with the “Some people are unworthy swine who you should not help” interpretation. According to the Bible, quite consistently who is in the sinful, fallen, broken, “All we like sheep have gone astray...” messed up people category? Well, that would be me and you, everybody. Now, if Jesus is the great treasure, the pearl of heaven, then he should never have been cast into the midst of us because we're all in the messed-up-people category.

Yet Jesus said it was precisely for the messed-up, sinful, wicked people that he came. “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Jesus did not teach that we shouldn't do good things for people who might reject or misuse them. He, in fact, taught precisely the opposite. “... love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and So, let's be very clear: Jesus is not saying here that certain classes of people are to be viewed as pigs or dogs that are unworthy of our great pearls. Nobody ever taught or modeled the worth and dignity of

every human being and the universal command to love all people with the depth and clarity of Jesus Christ.

The problem with giving a pearl to a pig is not that the pig isn't worthy. The problem is a pearl is not a helpful thing to give to a pig. Very few pigs wear pearls. Jesus is getting to a much deeper problem in human relationships with wisdom that could save our friendships, our marriage, our relationship with our kids, our families.

In the words of Dallas Willard-whose treatment of this passage I found to be remarkably insightful, this is about the practice of pushing the things of God upon people, whether they want or are ready for them or not. "What a picture this is of our efforts to correct and control others by pouring out our good things, often truly precious things, upon them... .Often, we don't even listen to them. We "know" without listening."¹

Remember, the context we are in right now is the way that we mishandle relationships by judging, by trying to take out the speck. What we look at now is the idea that a pearl does not nourish a pig, and nourishment is what the pig is looking for. What will help a pig is food. If you put a bunch of slop in the trough, you'll have a happy, healthy pig. If you put pearls in the trough, you will not have a happy pig. You will have a resentful pig. You might think, "You ungrateful pig, look at all the pearls you've been given!"

That won't help at all.

Eventually, the pigs will turn and take a bite out of you. Why? Well, they're hungry, and you at least are edible. It's the same with a dog. We love our dog, Baxter, but if we give him what is sacred, he will do with them the only thing Baxter knows how to do with something. That is, try to eat it. We got a big nativity scene one year when Baxter was a puppy, and he ate a wise man. He just ate him! We could put up with that. He ate a sheep. We could put up with that. Then he started to eat the baby Jesus in the manger. That just seemed way over the line. Our main command to him that Christmas was, "Baxter, stay away from Jesus." Do not give what is sacred to a dog, not because the dog is unworthy, but because it won't help the dog.

Now, this is critically important. When you study the Bible, you want to keep in mind the larger context of the passage you're looking at. In Matthew 7, Jesus discusses wrong ways of relating to people that are common in religious circles.

"Do not judge." He warns people against condemnation engineering.

"Don't point out the speck in your brother or sister's eye when there is a plank in your own."

Criticizing and blaming.

Now, “Do not throw your pearls to pigs.”

He is still talking about the wrong ways religious people relate to others. He is forbidding the practice of what we might call “pearl-pushing.” This is when you’re trying to push your pearls (your wisdom, your will, your way, your knowledge) onto another person, even when they don’t want it, even when it’s not helpful. If you’ve been through the Bible a few times, you might wonder, “But doesn’t pearl in the Bible always mean something of great value to Jesus?” Like when he talks about the kingdom of heaven as a pearl of great price. Of course,

Jesus, like all great teachers, will often use images quite flexibly. One time, he describes the kingdom of heaven as being like yeast because of its amazing growth, but another time, he says, “Beware the yeast of the scribes or the Pharisees.” In the second reference, yeast is a negative thing. So here, Jesus is teaching with some humor, and you must put “pearl” and “pig” in air quotes. Pearl pushers just drift into the habit of criticizing more naturally than encouraging. That’s what a pearl pusher does.

The apostle Paul says, “Let us therefore stop turning critical eyes on one another.” Pearl pushers are always trying to correct everybody because what they notice is where other people are wrong.

Somebody said there are only two kinds of drivers in the world. You may have noticed this. There are maniacs who drive faster than I do and idiots who drive slower than I do. “Look at that maniac going so fast. You idiot! Why don’t you move?” If you look for flaws, you will find flaws. If you search for faults, you will succeed. You’ll go through life wondering, “Why don’t people seem to want to be around me?” Pearl-pushing is a lonely way to live.

Pigs notice this. Pigs have pretty sensitive radars. The teaching here is: If the pig isn’t ready for your pearl, don’t push it. Part of love is not just knowing what to say; it’s knowing when to say it and (maybe more importantly) knowing when to not say it. Proverbs 27:14 says, “If anyone loudly blesses their neighbor early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse.” The pig wants to sleep!

Now, the pearl might be genuinely good wisdom. Maybe the pearl is the gospel about Jesus. A woman I know loved Jesus. She wanted her husband to love Jesus. That’s a good thing. She had this spiritual pearl she so badly wanted to give him, but she kept trying to force the pearl on him. She would say, “Read this book. Listen to this godly podcast. Consider these five proofs that God exists.” She would constantly remind him, “I’m praying for you.” She would sometimes pray at the dinner table-while her husband

was sitting there and the food was getting cold, and there might be other people there-for Jesus to save her husband. “Have another pearl. Have another pearl!” The pig was not happy about this.

When it comes to telling other people about your faith, one of the most important tips you can follow is to obey the law of supply and demand. In other words, monitor the level of demand for spiritual conversation, or help, or advice coming from the other person. Are they asking questions about God? Are they wanting to know what your story is? Would they like to hear wisdom from you? You adjust your level of supply (how long you go on talking about spiritual matters or life advice) to be commensurate with their level of demand (what they are asking for). If the other person stops looking at you; if they’re not nodding their head, asking questions, or making listening sounds; if they’re leaning backward, stop talking. Stop pushing the pearl and start watching the pig.

Pearl-pushing happens in marriages, in workplaces, between friends, in a church. But in my humble opinion, pearl-pushing is most likely to happen and most likely to do damage between parents and children. When our children were born, I was overwhelmed by the thought that we needed to watch over every part of their lives, every moment. We controlled when they ate, when they slept, what they wore, where they went, who they saw. And that’s a very heavy weight when you become a parent. I think there’s only one thing harder than being in control of your child’s life, which is not being in control of your child’s life.

We live with pressure, expectations, worry, hopes, love, and ego-all mixed up together. That’s just the truth for those of us who are parents. One mom, who had tried really hard to get her daughter into her top choice school so she could have a great life, said this: “My daughter didn’t get in. I’m worried about what this means for her future.” That’s understandable-but her daughter was literally only three years old!

Inflated expectations for our kids and pressure can lead to pearl-pushing. “Sit up straight. Clean your room. Get your homework done. Did you get your homework done? I don’t think your model nuclear reactor is good enough to get an A, so I guess I’ll have to do it for you. Why can’t you more like...? Why won’t you...? Why do you...? We may not even ask those questions out loud, but the pigs have really sensitive radar. Have you ever wished your parents had given you more lectures when you were growing up? “I wish I would have gotten one more talk about...” So often, our kids know exactly what we’re going to say-way before we even say it.

The point of Jesus’ teaching on the pearl and the pig is not, “Don’t confront.” It’s not “Don’t set boundaries.” It’s not “Don’t enforce consequences.” We all need that. Jesus’ point is don’t force your wisdom on a non-receptive person. We cannot control any other

human being. They have their kingdom. It's not my kingdom. I cannot make sure any human being turns out right. I must make space for God.

God is the only one who can enter into their little kingdom at the deepest level. In particular, for those of us who love God, I know we want, more than anything, for our children to love, know, and follow God too. There is nothing more painful, in quite the same way, for a parent than to know the greatest treasure of their life is unwanted by their child.

I was talking to a man who had a child later in life. He said his prayer was, "God, do not give me a child unless that child will be a lifelong Christian." He wanted a divine guarantee that he would have a no-risk child when it came to faith. "I don't want the pain of having to love a child who does not hold faith as I do."

I understand what he was saying, but I'm not sure I would want to be that man's child. I'm not sure I'd want to carry that kind of weight because God made everybody to be free. God makes people free, even at the cost of great pain to God himself. God loves people, even when they use their God-given freedom to reject God.

Tony Dungy was a famous Super Bowl-winning NFL coach. His son was going to high school, playing on the football team. He was expending a lot of energy doing that, but all he would eat for breakfast was a Pop-Tart. I love Pop-Tarts, but they're not the greatest source of nutrition in the world. Tony told his son about the science of nutrition, about training, about how he needed a bigger breakfast. "This is nothing." He is getting this from an NFL Super Bowl-winning coach. Yet, he doesn't respond at all.

One day Tony came downstairs to find his son fixing this great breakfast: eggs, bacon, oatmeal, fruit. Tony was so glad his pearl had finally gotten through, he couldn't resist commenting to his son, "Hey, you're fueling up today, buddy." His son said, "Yeah, my coach said I need a bigger breakfast." His dad is a Super Bowl-winning NFL rock star—but he's dad, so the pig doesn't want that pearl.

God loves our children more than we do. God's heart breaks over our children more than our hearts. We can release our children into the care of God. If you are a parent, you are responsible to your child; you are not responsible for your child. That is a burden you cannot carry.

There's a story about what can happen when you stop looking with a critical eye, when you stop trying to force your wonderful pearls all the time. It is fiction, written quite long ago. I want to tell you that story; you might have heard it, and then I want to tell you the story behind the story. It's a story about

a fifth-grade teacher named Mrs. Thompson and a fifth-grade boy she did not like. His name was Teddy Stallard.

Teddy did not play well with other children, and his clothes were kind of a mess. He was unpleasant to be around, uncooperative. It got to the point where she took delight in putting a lot of red ink on his papers, so he knew he wasn't doing well. It wasn't until halfway through the year, when she was reviewing his files, that she learned his story. Everybody has a story. Teddy's first-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He is a joy to be around." His second-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother is very ill. Life at home must be a trouble." His third-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy's mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest." Teddy's fourth-grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn, does not show much interest in school." By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem, and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright, shiny paper, except for Teddy's. Teddy brought her a present, but it was quite clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper he got from ripping up an old grocery bag.

Mrs. Thompson was quite careful to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found an old rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing and a bottle that was about one-quarter full of just some cheap perfume. She stifled the children's laughter when she examined how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and then dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stallard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my mom used to, and that bracelet looked really pretty on your wrist." After the children left, she cried for half an hour. On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic and instead began to teach children.

She paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, as she saw something good in him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in that class. Six years later, she got a note from Teddy. He had finished high school second in his class. Four years after that, she got another letter; while things had been tough at times, he would soon graduate from college with the highest honors.

Four more years passed, and eventually, another letter came. This time, the letter was signed, "Theodore F. Stallard, MD." He told her he'd met a girl; he was getting married. He asked her if she would come and sit in the place of the mother of the groom. She did. She wore the old bracelet, and she wore the perfume he gave her. When he thanked her

for being the best teacher he ever had, she told him he had it wrong: He was the one who taught her.

That story was written by a woman named Elizabeth Ballard. She said it was triggered by two real-life events. The first time when she'd been teaching a Sunday school class because she was a follower of Jesus. A grubby little boy in her class had given her a rhinestone bracelet and a bottle of cheap perfume.

That moment reminded her of the second event. She grew up in a family that was quite impoverished. She had no money, so she brought her teacher a gift of pecans from a tree in their yard. When all the other students started to laugh, the teacher stopped them. The teacher saved her by saying she was going to make a fruitcake, and this was just what she needed.

I think the reason that story has touched so many people is we forget that every day, we will choose the eyes we use to see people: eyes of judgment or eyes of love. I don't know about you, but I think the world is kind of tired of Christians trying to force their pearls on people.²

It's not our job, fixing and advising people who are not asking for it, and explaining everything that is wrong with the world and what the problem is with this group and that group, and, "Why don't these people behave?" I think Jesus created us to be the most inclusive, inviting movement in history. No more divisions. The dividing wall down. No more separating Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female. No pearl-pushing. No judging. No condemning. No superiority.

This raises the question.. .If you're not supposed to relate to people by judging or condemning, and if you're not allowed to force advice on them, and you're not supposed to do relationship by criticism, how are you supposed to relate to people?

What are you supposed to do if you're concerned about something or there's a problem where you want one thing and they want something else?

Jesus has a way.

It is actually the simplest, best practice for human relationships on earth. It unites people. It magically puts you on the same side.

It is how we are to relate not only to other people but also to God.

It is the basic operating system for relationships of the kingdom, and we'll talk about it in the next chapter.

Chapter 19 - Golden Rule Living

HUMILITY

One of the ways we can tell what somebody loves is by what they do when what they love gets violated.

I have a good friend who loves logic. He hates it when reason gets violated. For instance, if somebody misuses the word literally. “My head literally exploded.” Unless there are brain fragments on the ground, you’d better not say that around this particular friend. Someone else I know loves order and beauty, so they hate it when cupboards and drawers are carelessly left open, unclosed. I know somebody like that, and it’s unfortunate because I never leave drawers or cupboards unclosed, but they sometimes spontaneously open themselves in our home. Literally.

Some people love their car. I was backing out of a space a while ago. It was a very crowded parking lot. While I was backing out, I heard the sound of a tiny little scrape. Barely audible, but I thought I’d better get out and take a look. Sure enough, on the car next to me, there was a scratch. It was a tiny little scratch. Not a ding, not a dent, just a fine line. It was almost decorative. But I thought I’d better leave them a note. So I did, with my phone number on it. It wouldn’t have bothered me at all, but I have an old beater car. I’m not a car guy—I don’t care about cars. But the car that I scratched was not an old beater car. This was a brand-new Italian car whose name rhymes with “Terrari.” The owner called me up and said, “Thanks for leaving your name and being honest, I’ve got to tell you, this car is like my baby. I have to have it in mint condition.” I said, “I understand.”

He called me the next day. He said, “I’ve taken it into the shop, and they tell me the scratch cannot be buffed out. The whole panel has to be replaced.” I said, “I understand.” He called me the next day and said, “They told me they do not have the panel here in the States. They have to send to Italy and have it shipped over.” “I understand.” He called me one more time and said, “This whole thing has bothered me, put me over the edge so far I’m getting a brand-new car. You don’t owe me a thing.” I said, “Well if you’re not going to use the old car anymore...”

You can tell what somebody loves because if it gets hurt, they go bonkers. A writer named Walker Moore posed this question: “What do you think are God’s pet peeves?” What is it that God cares about so much he can’t stand it when it’s violated? God loves everything He has created, so if we pollute the oceans, if we destroy a rain forest, if we punch a hole through the ozone layer, we dishonor God. God thought of music, so when we write bad music, it dishonors God. But none of that stuff is at the top of God’s list.”¹

There actually is a list in the Bible of stuff God hates. Proverbs 6:16-19 says: “There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies and a person who [sows discord] in the community.”

We are learning we all have a little kingdom that starts with our body, and that’s what is talked about here. Haughty eyes. When somebody in a restaurant demeans someone on the wait staff; when people who are smart or rich or pretty get all puffed up about it; when people get dismissed because of their accent or their skin color or their culture. God hates that. A lying tongue. Somebody breaks a promise. A spouse breaks a vow. A politician deceives people. It wounds God’s heart. When the hands God gave us to help each other are used to commit violence against other people or to clutch on to resources that could give life to God’s children—or when those hands write emails that stab somebody in the back or wound somebody’s heart... The list goes on. Then, the summary comes at the end; in a text like this, when the writer says, “There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable,” the idea is not that a sudden additional thought occurs. This is a poetic way of emphasizing the final item on the list, which is to sow discord, to violate community, to damage shalom.

When I judge somebody, belittle somebody, exclude somebody, use somebody, when we engage in human trafficking, abuse a spouse, betray a friend, stop the life of an unborn child, ridicule a person with a disability, or just live in a world where these things are going on every day and you don’t do anything about them when we could... When we just close our eyes, shut our hearts, and suit ourselves.. Above every other single thing in all of creation, God values human beings—so when a human being gets mistreated, it deeply offends the Creator and Judge of all things.

Throughout the history of Israel, the point of the law, the whole burden of the prophets who were a unique moral force in the world—it was all so people could know these things about God. And then Jesus comes along, and he teaches the Sermon on the Mount. Toward the beginning of it, he says, “Do not think I’ve come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Anybody who puts aside the least of them and teaches others to do the same will be called the least.”

Then, in an intellectual tour de force of absolute brilliance, Jesus takes centuries of the greatest wisdom in the world, and through Israel’s teaching of the Law and the Prophets, he summarizes it—he gives the Cliffs Notes. Matthew 5-7 is the greatest teaching humanity has received. But Jesus is not done! Oh no, he outdoes himself and creates the Cliffs Notes on the Cliffs Notes.

The most brilliant teacher in history summarizes the most influential talk ever delivered and the greatest ethical maxim ever devised, and here it is: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets. ”This is bottom-line discipleship for everybody. I don’t care whether you believe in God or not, what you think about miracles, or the supernatural, or life after death. You can start with the Golden Rule—it will give you enough to keep you busy all day long.

If you were experiencing homelessness on the street, how would you want to be treated? How would you want somebody to look or not look at you, to talk or not talk to you? If you were receiving that email you’re writing, would you want someone to put a little joy, a little affection in it? If you’re having an argument with somebody, what would a Golden Rule argument look like? Part of the genius of the Golden Rule is we usually focus on how we are being treated. “How did your day go?” usually means, “How did people treat you? How did life treat you?” But the Golden Rule turns that around. “How did you treat people today? How did you treat life today?” The Golden Rule is tremendously empowering because it makes you an agent and not a victim. Every day is not going to be a “win the lottery” day, but every day can be a Golden Rule Day.

You can use it on people you like. You can use it on people you do not like, and, oddly enough, you will find you’ll start to like them more. You can use the Golden Rule while you are driving. You can use the Golden Rule while you are texting. You can use the Golden Rule by not texting while you are driving. You can use it across cultural divides, generational divides, with people who have ethnic or gender or moral or religious differences. You can use it with different personality types. I’m an extrovert, but this person is an introvert. How would an extrovert like it “done unto them?” This is why the Golden Rule is “golden” and not just a rule. A lot of rules just tell you what to do. “Do not exceed 65 miles an hour.” That requires no imagination at all. But the Golden Rule is all about imagination and creativity. Jesus is teaching you to begin by looking at your own heart. You will have to stretch your imagination. “How would I like to be treated?”

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, essentially said this about the Golden Rule: “It was certainly clever of Jesus to put it this way.” I just love thinking about the cleverness of Jesus. “The only example he sets up is ourselves. It is so clear you don’t need glasses to understand Moses and the Law. Thus, you are your own teacher, your own theologian, and your own preacher.” Whatever you would have done to you.²

In the Golden Rule, I place the other person on a par with me. They are not an object to be used. They have desires and feelings and intentions and dreams and fears—just like I do. I get out of myself and try to imagine, “What’s it like to be that age, that person, that gender, that culture, that experience, that background, those wounds?” It’s like the Golden Rule is a living thing. If you let it get inside you and let Jesus use it, it’ll begin to

move you from ego to love. Jesus deliberately says, “In everything do the Golden Rule.” How broad is that? It’s significant in the ancient world, and it’s significant today.

Occasionally, you’ll come across what’s sometimes called the Silver Rule. That’s the negative version: “Don’t do to others what you don’t want others to do to you.” But the Golden Rule is a call to action, not just avoidance. It is an unlimited opportunity to use initiative and creativity as a force for good. Not just that. But wait, there’s more! It is universal. Jesus doesn’t say, “Do unto your brothers and sisters. Do unto Christians. Do unto people who believe like you or look like you.” He uses the word anthropos, which is where we get our word anthropology. The idea is that we use it for all of humankind, for everybody, friends and enemies.

Jesus not only taught a Golden Rule message; he lived a Golden Rule life. If I were a leper back then, I would want to be touched. No rabbi would touch a leper. But, Jesus did. If I were a little kid, I’d want to be blessed. Little kids were way down on the status pole. Important people didn’t have time for little kids. Jesus did. If I were a prostitute back then, I would want to be respected and treated with dignity by a rabbi. No rabbi would do that with a prostitute.

Jesus did.

When he’s hanging on a cross with a thief next to him, and the thief says, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,” Jesus doesn’t say, “Are you kidding me? You’ve defied God your whole life long, and you’re being executed as a criminal. You’re asking me to do you a favor now?” He just says, “This day, you’ll be together with me in paradise. I’ve got this.”

He lived a Golden Rule life, he taught a Golden Rule message, he died a Golden Rule death, and he started a Golden Rule community.

We make life so complicated. “What should I do for my career? What if I don’t get into the right school? What if I don’t get the right job? What if I’m missing out?” Do the Golden Rule. No life that is lived by the Golden Rule is misspent, no matter how unimpressive it looks by human standards. No life that violates the Golden Rule is well spent, no matter how impressed other people might be by it. In Acts 10:38, there’s a little phrase Peter uses to describe Jesus’ life that I love. Peter was talking to Gentiles. He can’t use the language of Israel or the Old Testament Scriptures. He has to explain Jesus in a way they can understand, so he just says, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went around doing good.”

How much money do you need to go around doing good? How high must your IQ have to be to go around doing good? How vast your network? How much talent? One of the

great questions of life is, “What do I want to have on my tombstone? Peter’s description of his friend Jesus is simply this: “He went around doing good.” That’s the Golden Rule.

Now, another truth: The only way to come to understand and believe Jesus’ words is not to study them incessantly and abstractly—it’s to actually do them.

Do you want to guess what the application of this chapter is going to be? “Do the Golden Rule.” When? Every day. Where? Everywhere. To whom? Everyone. How? With Jesus’ help. Make this as concrete as you can: Start with whoever it is who’s closest to you.

I was studying this verse on a Friday, my day off that week. I thought, “I’m going to try to make this a Golden Rule Friday-kind of run a little experiment. I’ll just see as I go through the day if I can make every interaction a Golden Rule moment. How would the Golden Rule apply?” I asked Jesus to help me with this.

Nancy had to get up at 4:00 in the morning to travel. I woke up when her alarm went off. My first thought was, “I’m kind of disgruntled that I woke up this early, and I want to go back to sleep.” But then I thought, “If I had to get up early to go on a trip and Nancy were to get up with me in the morning, I would like that.” So I got up with my wife at 4:00 in the morning, even though I didn’t have to get up with her. (Hold your applause.) We went downstairs, and she ate breakfast, and then she said, “I’m going to go get dressed now; you can come on up and talk to me if you want.”

Often, in a moment like that, I’d be reading something and want to stay downstairs, but I thought, “If I was going to get dressed and leave on a trip, I’d like it if Nancy came and just sat and talked with me while I got dressed.” So I did that. Then she drove off in her car. At the San Francisco airport, she texted me from the gate: “Classic mistake.” She had left her car at the airport there, but she had to fly back home to the San Jose airport—which meant her car would be stranded at the wrong airport. She’d have to go very late at night to pick up her car. I thought, “It’s 6:00 in the morning on Golden Rule Friday. It’s my day off. I have nothing to do. Uber and Lyft were created for something like this! If I was dumb enough to have left my car at the wrong airport, I’d like my spouse to pick it up for me.” And I did. Now if I had left my car at the wrong airport, I probably wouldn’t like it if my spouse told everybody I was dumb enough to do that, but this isn’t Golden Rule Friday.

Just imagine if every home ran on the Golden Rule—every marriage, every parent/child interaction. Marital infidelity or child neglect or broken homes would no longer be issues. Sin would pretty much be wiped out. Golden Rule homes would be places of dignity and healing, of strength and love and joy. If we want, with Jesus’ help, we can become “Golden Rule” people. That same day, I had breakfast with a friend, and

throughout the meal, I kept trying to think, “How would I like to be listened to if I was this person? What questions would I want to have asked of me? What would I want to hear?”

I found myself enjoying the conversation far more when I focused on thinking about the other person. Then the bill came, and I thought, “It’s Golden Rule Friday, so I’m going to pick up the check.” But the other person also reached for it, so I got ready to do the “I’m paying this bill” tug-of-war. Then I paused to exercise a little Golden Rule imagination, and the thought that came was, “This person wants to give you the gift of picking up the check.”

So I just stopped and said, “Thank you. That would be very kind of you.” As they paid for the meal, they gave me the kind of smile that made me know they were experiencing more joy through giving than if I had insisted on picking up the check myself.

You can be a Golden Rule shopper. I was at a store the same day, Golden Rule Friday. I was in a hurry-I often wrestle with hurry. The person across the counter said to me, “Would you like to become a rewards club member and earn bonus points (and have us email you regularly for the rest of your natural life)?” The truth is, being a rewards club member is kind of a pet peeve of mine. Then I think about, “That person across the counter is a human being. They have hopes and dreams and fears and hurts-and Jesus died for them. Offering me a rewards card membership probably wasn’t even their idea. They probably have to do this, and they probably get hurried, self-important responses from shoppers all the time.”

So because it’s Golden Rule Friday, I say, “I would love a rewards club membership. I was hoping you would ask. Let’s do this.” Now, you don’t have to do this to do the Golden Rule-I’ve actually already thrown that card away. But what I can do is remember the person on the other side of the counter is a human being, and I can share a Golden Rule moment with them. How about at work? What would it look like for you to work the Golden Rule? Whether you work for a paycheck or as a volunteer, work is the creation of value.

Some time ago, I was at the O’Hare Airport in Chicago. I got on a shuttle bus to go to the rental car agency. Driving a shuttle bus is a stressful and thankless job, but the guy driving the shuttle bus was an absolute delight. He continually scanned the curbside, looking for anybody who needed a ride. He told those of us on his bus, “You know, I’m always looking for anybody who’s running late-a lot of people are. You can tell them by their eyes. I’m always looking for people’s eyes because I never want to miss one of them. I always want to get them. Here’s another one, right there,” and he pulled over and picked them up. We were cheering him on while he was picking people up. He grabbed people’s luggage before they could bend down to pick it up and bring it up on the bus.

When he got back on, he'd say to us, "Well, we're off. I know you're all eager to get there as soon as we can, so I'll get you there as quickly as possible." He created such a little community of joy on that bus, people didn't want to get off.

People wanted to ride around the terminal a second time just to be treated with the Golden Rule by this guy. When people follow the Golden Rule, folks who are lonely feel invited in. People who are strangers feel wanted. People who are excluded or depressed or disappointed feel a little bit like they're family. And the kingdom came down here... .would you believe-on a shuttle bus!

Make it an adventure in Golden Rule living. Make it a game. Keep score. See how many interactions you can have with other people where you creatively exercise a Golden Rule moment. When you forget (and you will), when you get it wrong, and you will, when you revert to ego or flesh, don't beat yourself up. Just confess it and receive grace. That's why Jesus died on the cross and shed his blood-so that we can be forgiven, empowered by the resurrection, and get back into the Golden Rule flow again.

As you practice the Golden Rule, people will want to be around you. You will become more invested in other people's flourishing. You will have more moments of joy and begin to discover the reality of the Kingdom of God. You will come to understand what the Law and the Prophets were talking about all of those centuries ago and come to believe, knowing in your soul it is true, it is the way things are.

Chapter 20 - Is Christianity Narrow-Minded?

OBEYING

Let's look at one of the more controversial and often misunderstood statements Jesus makes in the Sermon on the Mount. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."

This image of a narrow gate touches on a really deep concern a lot of thoughtful people have about religion and Christianity; in particular, their concern runs like this: Christianity calls certain beliefs wrong, and it calls certain behaviors immoral. Therefore, it impinges on human freedom by telling people what they must think and how they must live. Furthermore, Christians believe they know absolute truth; therefore, they believe people who disagree with them are wrong—and not just wrong, but condemned by God.

This is not a new concern: The French Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, "It is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned." Therefore, the distressing conclusion is Christians must be intolerant of atheists or agnostics, people of other religions, and even other kinds of Christians like Catholics versus Protestants or liberals versus conservatives.

Instead, humility is often thought to require giving up claims to exclusive truth. If we affirm the notion that "Nobody can really claim to know what is true," then I have my truth, and you have your truth—but nobody really knows what truth is. Nobody is in a position to make that determination—and that will lead to tolerance and acceptance because nobody would call anybody else wrong. It is often thought the narrow gate, or the narrow way, leads to narrow mindedness—to unthinking, irrational, blind compliance to authority, and intolerant bigots. Of course, it is very true that many of us who call ourselves Christians, past and present, are often guilty of such things.

If you carefully examine the life and teachings of Jesus, you notice what looks to our culture like a strange paradox. On the one hand, Jesus makes statements that are outrageously, staggeringly exclusive. On one occasion, he prayed, "... this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." Jesus is saying, "There is a God. He is the true God, so other gods are false gods. And not just that—he is the only true God." Most famously, Jesus once said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me, (John 17:3)."

In other words, Jesus did not present his teachings as optional suggestions for a better life. He claimed to know how things are. He claimed that what he said wasn't just wise;

it was true. He claimed this truth mattered more than anything else in the world. And yet, this man who made claims that were staggeringly exclusive pursued relational connections with people who were breathtakingly inclusive. He deliberately touched an untouchable leper. He allowed a known prostitute to bathe his feet with her fair. He commended a hated Roman centurion. He partied with despised tax collectors.

Here is one striking example of Jesus' relational inclusiveness. He was approached by ten lepers. Some Jewish, at least one of them was a Samaritan, so they would have been an inter-faith community. Jesus healed them. Then, he gave them this command. "Go, show yourselves to the priests." In that day, they didn't have doctors like we do; a priest was the one who would give a leper a clean bill of health, allowing him or her to rejoin society. We would expect Jesus, after healing the lepers, to say, "Show yourself to the nearest priest (singular)," but here he says priests. Plural. Why does he use the plural? Because Jewish lepers would go to Jewish priests, and the Samaritan leper would go to a Samaritan priest. In other words, Jesus does not say, "Now that I have healed you, you must all convert to my religion." He enters a healing relationship with both Jewish, unclean, un-Orthodox, non-Jewish lepers-and then actually sends them to their respective Jewish and Samaritan priests to be pronounced clean.

It's almost like Jesus thinks a relationship with him is now transcending human religious categories. It's like the narrower Jesus gets in his devotion to God, the more broad-minded he is in his love and reaching out to human beings. His followers often missed this dynamic.

One of the ways to measure people's broad-mindedness is to ask if they would find it difficult to have a natural, normal conversation with somebody in a minority group different from them—like a Muslim, or an atheist, or an evangelical, or a member of the LGBTQ community or a Mormon, etcetera. Most Americans indicate they think it would be difficult. The single group that has the hardest time having natural and normal conversations with minority groups, according to teacher David Kinnaman, is evangelical Christians. In fact (this is a little strange), not only do evangelicals have the hardest time having normal, natural conversations with atheists, or Muslims, or people of a different sexual orientation, but 28 percent of evangelicals say they have a hard time having a normal conversation with other evangelicals.

By contrast, the longest conversation recorded in the Bible is between Jesus and a pagan Samaritan, five-times-married-and-now-shacking-up-with-a-guy-who-is-not-even-her-husband woman whom no other rabbi likely would have ever gone near. In other words, when you look at Jesus and his followers today, by our own admission in research, the followers of the most inclusive man in history have become the most excluding people in American society. Often, we are quite lax in our devotion to God but relentlessly narrow-minded in our relationships with people.

Jesus was relentlessly narrow in his devotion to God but outrageously broadminded in his relationships. Why is that? Was he just inconsistent? Or maybe he was a nice guy but not a good thinker. Some have said that maybe these claims of Jesus' authority and religious convictions were made up by Paul and others and got retrofitted back into the Gospels. Some people say he was not that clear about his own identity or the exclusivity of his message. Or maybe... just maybe... the truth Jesus taught actually explains the life he led. Maybe the truth he taught is not in tension with the life he led. Maybe it explains it. Maybe the possibility of finding deep truth and offering broad tolerance are not mutually incompatible. Maybe they're mutually inextricable.

This is a very important topic for our day, for our culture, for people who follow Jesus or are thinking about it. When we think about the topic of tolerance and narrowness as we go through the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, you'll notice, does not command tolerance. He never says, "Be thou tolerant." Why is that? Well, tolerance has a kind of minimalist quality to it. It comes from a Latin word, *tolerantia*, which means to put up with or endure with, and that's not actually what the soul craves.

When Nancy and I got married, Nancy did not say, "I promise to tolerate you from this day forward for richer or poorer, for better or worse, in sickness and in health, to put up with and endure you until death shall bring relief." Parents don't tuck their kids in at night and say, "Goodnight, honey. Sweet dreams. I tolerate you." When somebody has a birthday, we don't sing, "I tolerate you. I tolerate you. I'm stuck with your existence. What else could I do?" We don't sing that when it's somebody's birthday. No matter how much we might want to.

You are not made by God to be tolerated. You are made by God to be celebrated. We all know this in our souls. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn't say, "Tolerate your enemies." He doesn't say, "Put up with those who persecute you, let alone people who think differently." He doesn't say, "If you're offering your gift at an altar and you remember your brother or sister has something against you and you don't like them and you don't like how they believe or act, tolerate them." He doesn't say, "If someone forces you to go with them one mile, put up with it." Tolerance is a good thing as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far. It goes one mile. It doesn't go two. Tolerance is better than intolerance, but it's a low bar. You can tolerate somebody without loving them, but you cannot love somebody intolerantly.

Jesus invites us into this spiritual reality where the primary law is love because God is love. Therefore, love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemy. Love will include the virtue of tolerance—but that leads to the question... Why should we practice tolerance? Tolerance itself, which is talked about a lot in our day, requires a foundation. If it is going to be an enduring virtue, it needs a rationale. It needs to stand on something. We need to be able to explain why we practice it. It's often claimed that people who say they

believe in absolute truth lead to hatred and war, that what we need is the practice of charity without the divisiveness of beliefs. But here's the problem: The claim that all people are equal in dignity, that all people are deserving of our tolerance, is itself a moral and spiritual claim to be believed or not believed-so where does the belief come from that all people have dignity and deserve to be tolerated?

Tolerance is built on the claim that every human being has dignity and equal worth. You undermine it by saying there is no such thing as being able to know truth, but then you end up eroding the very ground on which the practice of tolerance stands. In other words, the cure for arrogance and intolerance, which are horrible sins and often infect the church as much or more than any place else, is not to embrace uncertainty. The cure is that we embrace humility.

It's possible to be right and humble. It's also possible to be uncertain and arrogant. G.K. Chesterton wrote, "What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition [that is, the will or pride] and has settled upon the organ of conviction [that is the mind or confidence in logic or reason and the ability to know where it was never meant to be. A person was meant to be doubtful about himself but undoubting about the truth. That has been exactly reversed." In our day, we're all sure of ourselves. Chesterton said, "We are on the road to producing a race of people too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table." In fact, Jesus taught the greatest foundation for both tolerance and love resides in God and in his kingdom. People should be prized because they are loved by God. People should be free because God gave them a will, a little kingdom where they are to exercise dominion.

Yale professor Miroslav Volf noted that "It's no accident the first government that actually separated church and state, broke them apart, and created religious freedom, was founded in the colony of Rhode Island in the 1600s by a Baptist minister by the name of Roger Williams."

Here is what Roger Williams wrote: "It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus Christ, a permission of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the Word of God."²

In other words, you don't coerce somebody's worship at the point of a physical sword. The idea of freedom for worship and conscience didn't just appear out of thin air. Roger Williams wrote it is because every human being is created equal and free in God's sight that "Forced worship stinks in God's nostrils." Again, with Roger Williams, we see this odd paradox: it's precisely the narrowness of his devotion to God that led to this staggering broad-mindedness in the government and the society he led.

All of that brings us now to the narrow gate that Jesus is talking about in our text, which is so often misunderstood. The narrow gate is not narrow-mindedness. The narrow gate is not doctrinal narrowness. It's not always being right and having everybody else be wrong. The narrow gate is not religious intolerance. The narrow gate is doing what Jesus said to do. The narrow gate is obeying—and that's another word that has gotten mixed up. Obeying creatively, intelligently, joyfully, falteringly but with relaxed hands and ungritted teeth, obeying the one who has thoroughly mastered life and death, the one who knows. Obeying him in all things is the narrow gate.

What's the broad gate? Well, the broad gate is just doing anything else. It's doing anything except seeking to obey him in all things. Seeking to love the neighbor as self. It is in the narrow gate that we find freedom. Jesus once said, "If you [obey] my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Now, the phrase "...you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" is inscribed on more university campuses in our country than any other saying, but they do not often include the prior phrase, "If you obey my teaching, then you really are my disciples, and you will know the truth." In our day, we often think freedom is the opposite of having to obey anything. We often think of freedom as the absence of restrictions, but it is not.

When I was a child, one of our first pets was a goldfish. My sister, who is a great humanitarian, felt bad for that little fish being cooped up in a tiny little fishbowl all day, so one day, when my mom was in the other room, my sister liberated that fish. She took him out of his glass prison and set him on the carpet where he could breathe the fresh air of freedom and boldly go where no fish had gone before. You do not want to guess what happened to that fish? Not a good thing. In order to be free to live, a fish must be restricted to water. It's the fish's nature.

Freedom is not the absence of restraint and restriction. Freedom is found in the right restriction. It is swimming in the moral and spiritual reality of God and his kingdom, for which our little nature was made. If you obey the teachings of Jesus, he says, "You really are my disciples, and you will know the truth, and it will make you free," like water makes a fish free.

The issue Jesus is pushing relentlessly from here to the end of this Sermon on the Mount is this question... Whose disciple will you be?

Many people think the church exists to make Christians and that Christians are people who believe the right things you have to believe for a narrow-minded God to let you into heaven. That idea has to be deconstructed because Jesus never called anybody to be a Christian (you can look it up)—but he called everybody to be his disciple (prostitutes and tax collectors and Roman centurions and religious leaders and Samaritan lepers).

And disciple was not a confusing or vague or even particularly religious term. A disciple is somebody who has committed themselves to being with another person and learning from that person how to do something. You are somebody's disciple. That is to say, you have learned how to live from somebody.

This is the human condition; when a little baby is born, they have to learn how to talk and how to walk and how to read, how to spend their time and money, and how to relate to others, and what is worth sacrificing themselves for? Usually, at the beginning, we are the disciples of our parents. Then, our teachers or our peers or maybe our mentors. Or, often in our day, celebrities-or an online community. For better or for worse, on purpose or by drifting, for sure, you are somebody's or multiple somebodies' disciple.

When my sister and I were growing up, we wanted to learn how to play the piano, so we became disciples of our piano teacher, Mrs. Beier. Mrs. Beier was very German, and she was very strict. She made us time our practices. She made us use a metronome. She made my sister cut her fingernails short so they would not click on the keyboard. Mrs. Beier was so intimidating that at one point, she told my parents they needed to buy a more expensive piano for us to practice on, and they did -because she told them to!

Barbie and I finally decided we did not want to be her disciples anymore, and we told my parents. My parents were so afraid of Mrs. Beier that my dad paid me \$5 to call Mrs. Beier and tell her we were quitting. That was over 45 years ago, and I'm still afraid she will show up and make me play scales.

To be someone's disciple simply means to choose to be with them, to learn how to be like them in some way. When you are someone's disciple, you can evaluate the results of that discipleship in your life and, perhaps, choose a different master. Maybe a better, maybe one Master above all. When Jesus talks about the narrow way or the broad way, he is simply talking about the way life is. It has nothing to do with narrow-mindedness or the brittle "Look at how right I can be" mindset we often associate with religion.

Life is this way: If you want the freedom to make great music, you will have to arrange your life around practicing and lessons and scales and study. If you want the freedom to play great football, you must arrange your life around weightlifting and drills and coaching and watching footage. If you're an addict and you want to be sober and free not to use, then you must arrange your life around surrendering your will and, going through the 12 steps and getting a sponsor and helping other people. In other words, the narrow way is that way of life through which you receive the power to live the vision. To play a piano or to play football or to be sober or to live like Jesus, the narrow way is simply to arrange your life the way the vision requires you to. The broad way is just to do anything else. In particular, just do what you feel like doing or just do what everybody else does.

Now, when Jesus says that many take the broad road and few take the narrow road, he is not predicting how many people will end up in heaven, and, for sure, he is not saying God will be happy if only a few make it there. God is not willing that any should perish. Jesus is simply noting that the broad way is the default mode of life for people.

Generally, people tend to just drift through their lives by habit or by whatever they see going on around them.

So here is the question. Have you become a disciple of Jesus? Have you gone through the narrow gate? That's the decision. Is living the way Jesus would live if he were in your place your top priority, or are you a disciple of money or security or addiction or your image? This is crucial.

The urgency of Jesus' call takes up the entire end of the Sermon on the Mount. We don't have to respond to our own power through the Holy Spirit; the presence of Jesus will be available to us at every moment. He is always present through a thought of whatever is true, whatever is noble, we will never be alone in the narrow way.

I have a friend, Danny, who has had many amazing experiences. He has flown a homemade plane over Alaska. I have jumped off a cliff with Danny to go hang-gliding. I have seen him climb up Half Dome off-season—hanging onto a rope when he did not know whether the rope was tethered or not. One time, he went spelunking in a cave. His friend told him there was an inner chamber with a pool of great beauty, but you could only get there by a very narrow way, and Danny being Danny said, "Sure. I'm up for it." They started walking through that tunnel. After a while, the ceiling got lower and lower, and Danny had to crouch. It kept getting lower. He had to get on his knees. It kept getting lower. He had to crawl. It kept getting lower. He had to get on his stomach.

My palms got sweaty when Danny told me this story. Picture this cave. Pitch black. That little tunnel eventually was so constricted he had to lay flat on his back and exhale and scoot a few inches. Then, he would take another breath. But when his lungs were inflated, he couldn't move. He would have to exhale and scoot a little more in the dark. Why would Danny do this?

Well, frankly, I think there's a little something wrong with Danny. I think the cheese has come off the cracker just a little bit. He told me the only way he made it was to be there with a friend whom he trusted and who knew the way. That friend kept saying, "Keep listening to me, Danny. Don't think about the dark. Don't think about the cave. Don't think about the fear. Just listen to my voice. Just do what I tell you to do. You keep going, and we will get there," and they did.

You have a friend. You can count on him in the cave, in the dark, when you're scared and you can't breathe. You are not alone. You are maybe least alone when you feel most alone. He is there, Jesus, in the dark, "Don't give up. It's okay. I'm with you."

If you're thinking about becoming his disciple, listen to his voice when you get up, when you go to bed, when you go to work, when you come home, when you have a problem, and when you're filled with joy. Open up the Bible and ask, "God, would you speak to me?" Anytime you think of it, just practice doing what he said to do. Learn not just to obey him but to revel in the thought of obeying him, to think, "Maybe obeying him with his help is, in fact, the greatest opportunity I'll ever know."

Make your fundamental identity that you are a disciple of this man. Be utterly narrow in your devotion to him and then incredibly broad-minded and inclusive and outrageously loving in your interactions and acceptance and love and conversations and tolerance and celebration of people radically different from you.

And remember, when you go through that gate,

no matter how narrow the path,

no matter how dark the cave,

you are never alone.

Chapter 21 - Choose Your Foundation

Two thousand years ago, in a remote part of the world, an obscure carpenter-turned-rabbi walked on the shore of a lake, maybe on a lovely day. He saw two fishermen, very ordinary men named Peter and Andrew. He said to them, “Follow me,” and they left their nets and followed. Then he saw two more fishermen, brothers James and John. He gave that same cryptic invitation, “Follow me,” and they left their boats and followed. One day, he came to a tax collector, a despised profession, to a man named Levi. He said the same words: “Follow me.” Levi got up and left his booth. He left his profession and his whole way of life and followed this man.

In these stories, I wonder what else Jesus might have said or what else these people might have known about him. The stories don’t tell us because the focus is this single command, those two words. This man, whatever you think of him, walked around and issued what might be called the grand invitation:

“Follow me.”

Sometimes, people would say, “Yes,” and for them, it meant many things: high adventure, learning, poverty, suffering, frequent failure, danger, meaning, hope, and ultimately death. Everybody is going to die. The only real question is:

Have you found anything worth dying for?

Sometimes, he would issue this invitation, and people would say, “No.” Maybe that meant they chose security or comfort instead. We don’t know because we never hear from them again. We’ve been on a journey through the most impactful talk in history. It’s called the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus gave it on a little mountain. This whole book has pointed toward this moment.

At the end of Jesus’ message announcing what he called his “good news”-life with God, in the presence of God, in God’s favor -he made it available to anybody, to you, to me, to people the world has written off. Blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn-if they want to be blessed.

Having brilliantly described what makes someone a truly good person from the inside-after explaining why, in the care of this magnificent Father, you ultimately have nothing to worry about, nothing to fear; and having articulated how it is really the love of God expressed through the Golden Rule that is the foundation of reality-Jesus devotes the last portion of his talk to clarifying for people the great decision of life... Will you become his disciple or not?

It is good to take the fuzziness out of the word disciple because it has become a vague word to many. Many people think the job of the church is to make Christians, and they think of Christians as people who hold certain beliefs, particularly certain beliefs about Jesus, and that as long as they affirm the right beliefs or trust in those beliefs in the right way, they get to be forgiven and they have to be allowed into heaven when they die, and that's the difference between being a Christian and not being a Christian.

This never deals with the fundamental choice, which is "Do I actually intend to do everything this man Jesus taught? Do I intend to follow him?" Jesus never said, "Become a Christian" to anybody. The word Christian is used in the Bible only three times, and then simply as a nickname for disciples. The word disciple is used 269 times in the Bible, and it means a student, a learner, a follower, an apprentice. There is no vagueness to it.

If you are a learner, you know it. If you want to learn to play golf or how to speak Spanish or how to do brain surgery, then you become a student of somebody through lessons or YouTube videos or a book. You choose an appropriate way to be with someone, to learn from them how to do what they do, how to become like them. You know if you're doing this or if you're not. If somebody asks, "Are you learning to do brain surgery?" Nobody says, "Well, I'm not sure. Let me think about it. Maybe." You might not be a good student, but you know if you are a student or not a student. So the question is... .Are you a disciple of Jesus? Have you chosen above all else to follow this man, to identify with him, to do what he says, to live as he would if he were you?

Being a disciple doesn't mean being a good disciple; you can be a pretty bad disciple. See: Jesus with his twelve disciples, chewing them out for what terrible disciples they are! "Oh, you of little faith. Could you not stay awake and pray with me for one hour? What were you arguing about? Who's the greatest? Will you deny me three times? Get behind me, Satan. How long must I put up with you? Have I been with you so long, and you do not know who I am?" They were often really, really bad disciples.

It didn't matter. When I was learning to read in grade school, we got put into different reading groups based on our reading ability. Now, the group names didn't say that-the groups were named after birds, but you could tell how good you were based on the bird of the group you were in. There were eagles, and there were the robins, and there were the pigeons. If you were in the pigeon group, you didn't go, "Mom, guess what? Good news: I'm a pigeon!" But the good news is, It doesn't matter; you are going to learn.

How long it takes doesn't matter. The kingdom of reading, the kingdom of learning, will become open to you if you continue to work at it. Now, these first disciples were in the pigeon group, so you and I are in good company! The kingdom still opened up to them

because they had chosen to be with him, to learn from him, to discover how to become like him.

Of course, today, Jesus is no longer physically present in body, and that's a very good thing. Remember, a deep part of Jesus' teaching is that what is most real is unseen. "When you give or fast or pray, your heavenly Father who is unseen sees what is done in secret." He knows what is not physically visible, what you think, what you feel, what you choose. That's where ultimate reality lies and Jesus will be there with you if you want him to, if you ask him.

The fundamental decision that faces us all is this: Will I actually do what he says? The word obedience is a difficult word for us often because we have wrong ideas about what Jesus taught. Obedience is often thought to be a bad word in our day. It's generally not a compliment to be called obedient. Teachers will praise kids by saying to their parents, "Your child is a leader," "Your child is a risk taker," or "Your child is gifted." Obedience is so poorly thought of that one of the great compliments in our day is to be disruptive. A teacher once told a set of parents I knew, "Your child is disruptive," and they were high-fiving. They didn't realize it was not intended to be a compliment.

Obedience school is for dogs. A friend of ours told us he was taking his hunting dog to remedial obedience school. Nancy immediately wanted to know, "Do they have one of those for husbands?" To be obedient in our day conjures up somebody who is robotic, compliant, or a weak-willed conformist. Of course, Jesus wanted none of these. Jesus did not say, "I have come that you might be a weak-willed conformist and do whatever you're told by anybody for no good reason at all."

A disciple is someone who seeks to obey Jesus with creativity, imagination, initiative, agency, discernment, and boldness. Joyfully-not grudgingly. With growing ease as God's transforming power gets into what the Apostle Paul calls the members of your body.. .in your little hands, what they do; in your little feet, where they go; in your little eyes, what they see; in your little mouth, what it speaks-into the habits that mostly make you up. When this happens, obedience, that is life, creativity, joy, and love increasingly flow out of you.

These will be accompanied by humility as we realize the only way to live in the kingdom is with daily manna that is a reprieve from the train wreck that would otherwise be my ego and sin, with great courage, for it will often mean standing in noncompliance under some pressure; with moments of great inspiration when you are gripped by the realization that the only explanation for his unprecedented impact is this: He is the most magnificent human being who has ever lived, and it is the greatest opportunity for any human being who has ever come along to become his friend, to stand with him, and to be a part of what he is doing in this world.

At the end of this great talk, Jesus presses for a decision. He says we stand at a great crossroads. We face two choices: the narrow gate that is obedience to him in all things or the broad gate that is simply anything else. We will either become a good tree that flows with inner goodness—the ceaseless flow of thoughts, feelings, intentions, and desires that become words, actions and generosity—and will make other people say, “What a good God He must be to think up somebody like that!” Either we will become that good tree, or we will rot with ego, self, pride, pettiness, greed, bitterness, and anger. If you do the will of our Father, which is goodness, joy, peace, and love, you will live. If you choose another will, your will, you will perish. We stand at this crossroads. Jesus ends his talk with these words:

“Therefore, everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

In the eyes of Jesus, there's no good reason not to do what he said to do because what he tells us to do is, rightly understood, simply the best. It's not compliance. It's not mechanical. It's not a rule book. It requires discernment and judgment and initiative. It means becoming a person radiant with goodness.

Imagine you applied and got accepted at the greatest company in the world, and you report to the CEO. He's not just a brilliant leader and a creative wizard; he's deeply invested in your personal development. He says, “I want you to work on this project, develop this competence, build this team, and care for this client—so you can become a great contributor.” You say, “No. I don't intend to do what you tell me to do. I want to be on staff, I want to get a paycheck, I want to have an office, I want to receive benefits, but I want to do what I want to do.” How long would you last there?

Imagine you get selected to be a part of the greatest team in history. The coach is not just a strategic genius and an inspirational figure; he is deeply committed to your excelling. He says, “I want you to do these drills, watch these tapes, study this playbook, practice these exercises, serve this team,” and you say, “No, no, no. I want to be on the roster, I want to wear a championship ring, I want to have the uniform, I want to get endorsements, I want the banner to belong to me, but I don't intend to do what you tell me to do.” How long would you last on that team?

Now, imagine standing before Jesus one day and trying to explain to him why you did

not ever fully intend to do all he said to do. People far wiser than me will tell you selective obedience simply will not usher us into a life of full confidence in this man.

There is a wonderful line in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous that reminds us we are all people who stand at a great crossroads between life and death. “Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked for his protection and care with complete abandon.” “There is one who has all power—that one is God. May you find him now!”

To clarify our condition, Jesus tells a story. These are actually two little stories we’ve just read, and the way to understand them is to set them side-by-side and look at what is similar in each story and then look at the variable. When we see the difference, we get the point.

In these two stories, there are a few constants. The first is that everybody builds a house. You could replace the word house with the word life: Everybody is forming a character. Everybody is constructing a soul, badly or beautifully, on purpose or by accident, with God’s help or on your own.

Everybody builds a house.

For the most part, we do this by the choices we make-most of which we just don’t think about. “How will I spend my time? What words will I speak? What are the thoughts that will occupy my mind, and where shall they come from? What shall I do with my money? What people shall shape me? What shall day after day, after day of my life go toward building?” Often, we deal with this by trying to put decisions off. “Should I work on my marriage, which I know is in trouble? Shall I deal with this habit I know is a flaw? Should I care for my body? Then, not to decide becomes its own decision with its own consequences.

Everybody builds a house; you cannot avoid it, and you cannot abdicate responsibility. I cannot slough it off on my parents or my peers or my boss or my family, which is what I often try to do.

Everybody is building a house.

A second constant is that everybody faces a storm.

This is not a story about storm avoidance. We wish it were. We’d like to be able to go someplace where there’s better weather. I used to live in Chicago, Illinois. Now, I live in California. The weather is better in California, but this is not a story about leaving Illinois and moving to California.

There is no way to do storm avoidance in life. Not by having more money or being really smart or even by having a lot of faith. The storm will come.

When we lived in Chicago, we had neighbors, and the husband was kind of the glue on our little cul-de-sac. He never met a stranger. He always had time to talk. Just a fun person. He loved to laugh, lots of energy. He was a home improvement guy—kind of like the men in Jesus' story. He was literally never without a project. After he finished each project, he would invite us over to look at it and celebrate together. After he finished his basement, he said, "Come see what I have done." Remodeled his kitchen, "Come see what I have done." Built a beautiful gazebo in his backyard, "Come and have a look." We would, and my wife would always look over at me like, "What have you been doing?"

One Monday morning, we saw an ambulance come to that house. I drove to the hospital with his wife, and we sat in the waiting room together. When the doctor came out, he said that her husband had suffered a heart attack and didn't make it. The storm came. They had two teenage children. It was a long and painful story—but in some beautifully redemptive ways, a hopeful story.

Everybody faces a storm.

Yet somehow, storms surprise us. We think we shouldn't have to deal with a storm. We think we're smart or strong, but the strength of the storm will reveal the foundation of the house. It's good to understand that in Jesus' story, he's not just talking about problems in general; he also has something in particular in mind. In the Bible, a storm is often used as an image of the judgment of God, it is a picture of how God does not intend to let this world go on being messed up; he will one day disrupt it and set things right.

You might remember the story of Noah in Genesis; the storm and the flood are an expression of God's judgment on a messed-up world. Hebrews 9:27 says every human being is appointed to die once. We live once. You didn't get here by your choice, and one day you will die, and then the writer of Hebrews says we will face the judgment of God. We will be accountable to God for our life.

Everybody builds a house.

Everybody faces a storm.

The variable in this story is the foundation. We will either build our lives on obedience

to Jesus, identifying with him and drawing on his grace and help to do what he said, or we'll do something else. We get to choose.

Wisdom reminds us: "Half measures availed us nothing." Often, our problem is that we prefer half measures. We'd like a little surrender when we feel like it. A little devotion, a little generosity. I'd like a little help from God when I need it but a little distance from God when I want it. But no one can live in half a house. It is striking that Jesus does not say, "Here's a story about a good man and an evil man." No, "There was a wise man and a foolish man."

Jesus understood this about us. We don't usually choose to be evil; life just kind of happens. Parents understand this. When children do something they shouldn't, something destructive, something infuriating, parents almost always ask them the same foolish question. "Why, Why, Why, Why? Why did you do this foolish thing? Why did you cut your sister's hair until she was bald in order to make a little nest for birdies in a Styrofoam cup?" "Why did you shove Flintstones vitamins up your brother's nose and leave them there for a year until we had to take him to the ER and find out through an x-ray that our child had Flintstones vitamins up his nose?" "Why did you stick a glass light bulb in your mouth that was so big you could not open your mouth wide enough to get it out again? What were you thinking?" Parents always ask that same dumb question, and children always respond with the same answer. "I don't know. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Why did you build your house on the sand?"

"I don't know."

Nobody gets married and plans on getting divorced. Nobody meets somebody at the office and plans on an affair. Nobody has a child and plans to neglect them. Nobody goes out in the world and plans to be greedy or selfish or racist or not care about human needs or spend all their money on themselves. Nobody plans to go through life bitter, joyless, in despair. Nobody plans on going to hell. It just happens.

So, rock or sand? Follow or not? This is the great decision that God sets before each of us that God sets before each of us. It is important to seek to make this commitment soberly and not in a temporary moment of emotion. Sometimes, religious communities try to play on our emotions, but when the emotion fades, so does the commitment. Jesus gives a little advice on this in Luke 14:28-29, where he tells another story about a little building project:

"Count the cost. Before you decide, count the cost to the best of your ability."

Now, really, there are two costs to count. The first is the cost of discipleship. (That's a wonderful phrase from that great Christian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.) There will be a cost of

following Jesus. What does it mean for me to surrender my will, my ego, my reputation, my money? Very often, there will be something in particular, a habit or a relationship, that a disciple will have to give up. Maybe it involves sexuality. Maybe it involves time. Maybe it involves anger. Maybe it involves going back to repair something I've done wrong. There will be something.

The cost is not that I will try grudgingly, every day, really hard through my willpower, to obey Jesus' rules. The idea is that I identify with him, and through his grace, I arrange my life around practices, relationships, and rhythms through which I receive true inner goodness, life, and grace from the Father. Of course, it's a lot like getting married or having a child—there's a lot you don't know at the beginning, but you do your best to count your cost of being a disciple.

Then, much less often talked about, there is the second cost: the cost of non-discipleship. What is the price that we will pay if you do not follow this man? This would be, Dallas Willard writes, a crushing burden of chronic disappointment, aloneness, isolation, and enslavement to ego, desire, image, and reputation. Just a soap opera of everyday life. "Will I get what I want?" Then despair and, one day, a meaningless death. The cost of discipleship is exceedingly small when laid next to the cost of non-discipleship.

But whatever we choose, "Counting the cost" lies before every one of us. When Jesus was teaching, something happened deep in the souls of the people sitting there. Hearts pounded, and minds raced, and spirits said, "This is it. This is what I've been looking for my whole life, but I didn't know. To actually know God; to be cleansed and forgiven of guilt and regret and the stupid stuff I've done through the grace of the cross; to have a life beyond worry and fear; to be freed from the chronic desire for more safety or more money or more pleasure or a better image. To be a little part of God's plan in his great world, to have the confidence of life beyond death. I must have this. I would rather have this man and give up everything else in the world than have everything in the world and give up this man.

So, I've made up my mind: I will pay whatever the price. I'll do what he says. I'll go where he wants. Then, occasionally, somebody would leave the crowd and become disciples of Jesus. They became followers of this man. They would love him and walk through life as his friend.

So, as we move toward the end of our study, we each face this great question. Not "Am I Christian?" or "Will I go to heaven?" but "Have I become his disciple?" Here is the invitation: "I am enrolling in the school of Jesus. I make him my master. I commit to be with him each day to learn from him how to live like him. This is the grand invitation. This is life on the rock.

Chapter 22 - Conclusion

Over the years, people have found a thousand ways to immerse their minds and lives in the Sermon on the Mount—through art, poetry, stories, songs, phrases written down on their desks or in their books, framed sayings in their homes, or reworded expressions to recapture the freshness of its meaning. So here's one modest semi-poetic retelling offered for no other reason than to encourage you to work on your own immersion.

*Blessed are the poor, and the sore, and the meek,
Blessed are the pure, the unsure, and the weak,
Blessed are the short; blessed are the slow,
Blessed are the drop-outs and the washouts and the burnouts and the left-outs;
Blessed are you... when you're dissed and dismissed on account of me...
Be glad. Be very glad.
You're living the dream.
It is mostly unseen.
Things are not what they seem.
You are the salt of the earth; don't lose your flavor; don't lose the savor.
You are the light of the world. Let it shine.
Do not think I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets.
I have not come to still them,
I have come to fulfill them.
The Law is not the source of goodness, but it is forever the course of goodness.
Don't be conformed on the outside; be transformed on the inside.
People think you're good with God if you don't murder. But take it from me—anger will
murder you.
Leave your gift at the altar;
your heart will be an altar,
or your heart will be altered by anger into a factory of hate.
People think sexual purity is scandal avoidance. Cut off your hands, pluck out
your eyes. Spiritual maturity by dismemberment.
Or you could let me change your heart,
give you a new start,
take over each part.
I can change the course of your divorce.
I can change the force of your discourse.
Let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. Every spin or sin comes from down below.
Turn the cheek, give the shirt, go the mile.
Love leads. Love bleeds. Be like that.
Do not practice your righteousness in front of others, to be approved by them.
It's an addiction,
it's an affliction,*

you'll become a fiction.

*Make giving like tying your tie, like tying your shoes; it's not even news,
keep your left hand in the dark.*

Hypocrites pray to look good,

they want applause,

they're a lost cause.

Unseen, unknown,

in secret, alone,

He's near, Hell hear

When you're fasting, you can be feasting. Don't advertise. Disguise.

Don't store up for yourselves treasure on earth. Recognize worth. Rust.

Moth. Thief.

Put your money where your mouth is. Your heart will follow. Greed is hollow.

Don't worry about your life. Look at the birds of the air. No ulcers, no colitis,

no high blood pressure. But they're fed by Chef God.

Look at the Lilies. No labor. No stress.

But Kardashian and GQ in the way they dress.

I wouldn't worry. Eliminate hurry.

Look for God. Everywhere. Every minute. Cuz he's in it.

I wouldn't worry.

Don't judge. Your measure will be your treasure.

Remember the speck and the plank.

Remember the pig and the pearl. Help the pig. Save the pearl.

Ask, Seek, and Knock. It's how the universe works.

*Do unto others what you would have them do unto you, for this is the Bible in
a tweet.*

Now, choose this day:

Will you do what I say?

Will you obey?

Follow the narrow way?

Or—follow the herd.

Ignore my word.

Let your heart be unwashed, uncured.

Everyone is building a house.

Everyone is facing a storm.

It will come without trying.

It will come when you are dying.

Build it strong. Face it well.

And he finished.

And they were amazed.

*Salt of the earth. Light of the world. Second Mile. Birds of the air. Lilies of
the field.*

Daily bread. Treasure in heaven. Our Father. Kingdom Come. House on the Rock.

Ask. Seek. Knock.

Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed. Amen.

So we pause now at the end to think about the Sermon and our lives. What will it mean for the rest of today, and tomorrow and the next day?

When Jesus had finished his sermon, and the crowds expressed amazement at his wisdom and authority, it was time for Matthew to get on with the rest of Jesus' story. So he begins the next chapter, the eighth chapter, with these words: "When Jesus came down from the mountain..."

You understand, coming down from the mountain is not just a change in elevation. Jesus had to leave the place of profound inspiration and amazed appreciation for the grind of daily life, the demands of crowds and the slowness of his disciples and the challenge of his work and the danger of the opposition.

It is not an accident that this Sermon was delivered on a mountain. Many commentators have noted the echoes of Jesus as a new Moses'; just as Moses went up Mt Sinai and delivered the words that would shape Israel, so Jesus went up the mountain and delivered the teaching that would fulfill the work Moses began, that would fulfill the destiny of Israel to be a blessing to the world.

Jesus' experience of transfiguration, which, by the way, is the high point of humanity so far!—occurred on a mountain, as did his temptation and his crucifixion. In the Bible, as in the ancient world generally, mountains were the natural settings for transcendent experiences. They were places of worship and visions. A mountain is the place where heaven and earth come together.

Even in our day, we will speak of mountain-top experiences when we are inspired or deeply moved about the importance of becoming our best selves. We may experience those moments in the beauty of nature-on a literal mountain, perhaps—or while listening to a great talk, or being away on a retreat, or in an experience of deep worship. On the mountain, we *believe*. We sometimes live for those moments. But we do not get to live continually *in* them.

We must come down from the mountain.

We must find a way to bring the beauty and truth that we learned—that we felt—on the mountain into the world of bills and illness and work pressures and family fractures and

Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Instagram comparisons and boredom that is life on level ground.

Jesus relentlessly confronts us at the end of the talk with the great choice we must make: Two Gates, Two Roads, Two Kinds of Trees, True and False Prophets, Wise and Foolish Builders, Rock or Sand.

And here we are reminded of the two groups of people in the audience. There were the crowds, mesmerized by Jesus' words as long as they were on the mountaintop but who made no commitment which might bind them to Himself. And there were the disciples, who knew, even as they came down the mountain, that they were bound to go where this man went and do what this man said.

When we come down the mountain, it's time to choose. We choose in large ways-to identify with Him and give him our devotion-but we also choose in small ways, daily, from one moment to the next.

However, as we end our time in this Sermon, it is good to remember that what we ultimately depend on is not our choice; it is his presence. Years ago, I was part of a conference that aimed to serve pastors; Dallas Willard suggested that the conference be called "Pastors as Teachers of the Nations." A friend and I asked Dallas, "Isn't that title a bit audacious?" His immediate and almost aggressive response was: "Yes-when Jesus said his followers were to go into all the world and make disciples and teach them to obey everything that I have commanded, **it was the most audacious statement in human history.** Napoleon never said that. Caesar never said that. Confucius or the Buddha or Mohammed. Jesus said that. And he added a singularly audacious promise: "And surely I will be with you always..."

When we come down the mountain, we come down with Jesus. We enter life in the valley with Jesus. In the end, it is his presence and not our choice that we count on.

John Stott notes that sometimes people mistakenly think the Sermon on the Mount only expresses moral guidance about what humanity should do, without any revelation about 'how things are'—what's real, what we can trust. But the main question the sermon itself forces upon us, he says, is not so much, "What do you make of this *teaching*?" but "What do you make of this *teacher*?"¹

In Jesus' day, when rabbis taught, they would cite, for their authority, the opinions of other rabbis. When the prophets of Israel spoke, they would cite, for authority, heaven itself: "Thus saith the Lord..." When Jesus taught, he would cite himself. "You have heard it said, but I say to you..." His gospel was that the Kingdom of the Heavens was

now available to everybody. Why did he believe this? What had happened to make it so? One thing-now he himself was available. He was at hand.

He is the Great Cause. He said that just as the prophets had a great heavenly reward when they were persecuted for God, so too would his followers have a great heavenly reward when they were persecuted “because of *me*.”

He is the Great Judge. When ‘that day’ of judgment comes, Jesus does not say what any other prophet would say—that God will pronounce judgment. He says: “Then I will tell [the false disciples] plainly, “*I never knew you. Away from me, evildoers.*”

He is the great foundation. He says peoples’ wisdom or folly will be revealed by whether or not they put into practice “these words of *mine*.”

Audacious.

So, the Great Invitation is two-fold. We will seek to always obey him intelligently, creatively, joyfully. And we will seek always to be with him trustingly, honestly, perseveringly.

And when we don’t feel like it, when we decide to take some ‘time off to do what we want to do or be on our own—we will be honest with him about that as well. He already knows and can certainly handle it.

So you might make a little plan now. Ask yourself, “How will you bring the Teacher and his Teaching with you down off the mountain?” Become a student of this message and return to it often. Reflect on it. Pray it. Perhaps memorize it. Experiment with it. Test it. Practice it. Honestly evaluate its impact. Let it shape your waking (“Ask, Seek, Knock”) and sleeping (“Do not worry”) and working (“You are the light of the world”) and anger (“Pray for those who persecute you”) and family life (“love your enemies”—maybe).

Terrence Malick’s film *A Hidden Life* examines an Austrian villager named Franz who is seeking to resist—and will finally sacrifice his own life to resist growing Nazi evil. He is discouraged in this by many authorities, including his own priest, the village mayor, and the bishop, who reminds him how little power any one person possesses. And yet. In one scene, he walks past the village and is startled by a crucifix on a pole; the sight disturbed him.

He returns to his church, where he talks with a painter who is retouching frescoes on the walls. The painter himself is haunted by what it would cost to actually follow Jesus; he paints lovely Christian scenes which—he knows—help the villagers to imagine that they would have stood with Jesus in his day of trial even while they fail to stand with them in

their own day: “I paint their comfortable Christ, with a halo over his head... What we do is just create sympathy. We create... admirers. We don’t create followers... Someday, I might have the courage to venture, but not yet. Someday, I’ll paint the true Christ.”²

Now is our time. Others have come before us, and others will follow after. Now is the Grand Invitation to both admire what he taught and do what he said, to seek his kingdom above all and live in his presence as his friends. With his help. One day at a time.

How far might one human being, with their actual life, be able to paint an accurate picture of Christ? How far might you or I?

Audacious.

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John Ortberg is a pastor, author, and speaker. He's been in ministry for over 40 years and teaches about spiritual formation. He is a deep believer that the main thing God gets out of your life is the person you become. Informed by that philosophy, John leads the ministry, Become New, focused on helping you grow spiritually one day at a time. He desires for people to know God in an interactive, life-transforming way.

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About Become New

John Ortberg is the leader of Become New, a ministry devoted to helping you grow spiritually one day at a time. Become New provides daily 10-minute devotional content aimed at encouraging personal reflection on our own personal spiritual formation. Each devo provides a teaching and an attainable invitation to put it into practice.

You can subscribe to receive these teachings at becomenew.com/subscribe. You can also find us on YouTube or wherever you get your podcasts.

ABBA'S CHILD

CHAPTER TWO

The Impostor

Leonard Zelig is the quintessential *nebbish* (Yiddish for nerd). In Woody Allen's hilarious and thought-provoking film *Zelig*, he is a celebrity non-entity who fits in everywhere because he actually changes his personality to each evolving situation. He rides in a ticker-tape parade down Mohalles canyon of heroes; he stands between U.S. presidents Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge; he clowns with prizefighter Jack Dempsey; and he talks theater with playwright Eugene O'Neill. When Hitler rallies his supporters at Nuremberg, Leonard is right there on the speakers' platform. He has no personality of his own, so he assumes whatever strong personalities he meets up with. With the Chinese he is straight out of China. With rabbis, he miraculously grows a beard and sidecurls. With psychiatrists, he apes their jargon, strokes his chin with solemn wisdom. At the Vatican he is part of Pope Pius XI's clerical retinue. In spring training he wears a Yankee uniform and stands in the on-deck circle to bat after Babe Ruth. He takes on the black skin of a jazz trumpeter, the blubber of a fatty, the profile of a Mohawk Indian. He is a chameleon. He changes color, accent, shape, as the world about him changes. He has no ideas or opinions of his own; he simply conforms. He wants only to be safe, to fit in, to be accepted, to be liked.... He is famous for being nobody, a nonperson.¹

I could dismiss Allen's caricature of the people-pleaser, except that I find so much of Leonard Zelig in myself. This radical *poseur* of my egocentric desires wears a thousand masks. My glittering image must be preserved at all costs. My impostor trembles at the prospect of incurring the displeasure and wrath of others. Incapable of direct speech, he hedges, waffles, procrastinates, and remains silent out of fear of rejection. As James Masterson has written in *The Search for the Real Self*. "The false self plays its deceptive role, ostensibly protecting us—but doing so in a way that is programmed to keep us fearful of being abandoned, losing support, not being able to cope on our own, not being able to be alone."²

The impostor lives in fear. For years I have prided myself on being punctual. But in the silence and solitude of the Colorado cabin, I learned that my predictable performance was rooted in the fear of human disapproval. Reprimanding voices from authority figures in my childhood are still fixed in my psyche and trigger warnings of rebuke and sanction.

Impostors are preoccupied with acceptance and approval. Because of their suffocating need to please others, they cannot say no with the same confidence with which they say yes. And so they overextend themselves in people, projects, and causes, motivated not by personal commitment but by the fear of not living up to others' expectations.

The false self was born when as children we were not loved well or were rejected or abandoned. John Bradshaw defines codependency as a disease "characterized by a loss of identity. To be codependent is to be out of touch with one's feelings, needs, and desires."³ The impostor is the classic codependent. To gain acceptance and approval, the false self suppresses or camouflages feelings, making emotional honesty impossible. Living out of the false self creates a compulsive desire to present a perfect image to the public so that everybody will admire us and nobody will know us. The impostor's life becomes a perpetual roller-coaster ride of elation and depression.

The false self buys into outside experiences to furnish a personal source of meaning. The pursuit of money, power, glamour, sexual prowess, recognition, and status enhances one's self-importance and creates the illusion of success. The impostor is what he *does*.

For many years I hid from my true self through my performance in ministry. I constructed an identity through sermons, books, and storytelling. I rationalized that if the majority of Christians thought well of me, there was nothing wrong with me. The more I invested in ministerial success, the more real the impostor became.

The impostor prompts us to attach importance to what has no importance, clothing with a false glitter what is least substantial and turning us away from what is real. The false self causes us to live in a world of delusion.

The impostor is a liar.

Our false self stubbornly blinds each of us to the light and the truth of our own emptiness and hollowness. We cannot acknowledge the darkness within. On the contrary the impostor proclaims his darkness as the most luminous light, varnishing truth and distorting reality. This brings to mind the apostle John's words: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8, NIV) .

Craving the approbation withheld in childhood, my false self staggers into each day with an insatiable appetite for affirmation. With my cardboard facade intact, I enter a roomful of people preceded by a muted trumpet: "Here I am," whereas my true self hidden with Christ in God cries, "Oh, there you are!" The impostor bears a distinct resemblance to alcohol for the alcoholic. He is cunning, baffling, and powerful. He is insidious.

In one of Susan Howatch's early novels, *Glittering Images*, the principal protagonist is Charles Ashworth, a brilliant young Anglican theologian who suddenly experiences complete moral collapse. Estranged from his father and longing for his paternal blessing, Ashworth goes to a monastery to meet with his spiritual director, an older man named

Jon Darrow. Ashworth is frightened of being exposed as a venal clergyman and a spiritual failure. Cunningly, his impostor intervenes:

The thought of abject failure was appalling enough, but the thought of disappointing Darrow was intolerable. In panic I cast around for a solution which would protect me in my vulnerability, and when Darrow returned to my room that evening, the glittering image said to him: "I do wish you would tell me more about yourself, Father. There's so much I'd like to know."

As soon as the words were spoken, I felt myself relaxing. This was an infallible technique for acquiring the good will of older men. I would ask them about their past, I would listen with the ardent interest of the model disciple and I would be rewarded by a gratifying display of paternal benevolence which would be blind to all the faults and failings I was so desperately anxious to conceal. "Tell me about your days in the Navy!" I urged Darrow with all the warmth and charm I could muster, but although I waited with confidence for the response which would anesthetize my fear of unfitness, Darrow was silent.... Another silence fell as I painfully perceived the machinations of my glittering image.⁴

The impostor is attentive to the size, shape, and color of the bandages that veil my nothingness. The false self persuades me to be preoccupied with my weight. If I binge on a pint of Haagen-Dazs peanut butter vanilla and the scale signals distress the following morning, I am crestfallen. A beautiful day of sunshine beckons, but for the self-absorbed impostor, the bloom is off the rose. I think Jesus smiles at these minor vanities (checking myself out in the storefront window while pretending to look at the merchandise), but they kidnap my attention away from the indwelling God and temporarily rob me of the joy of God's Holy Spirit. Yet the false self rationalizes my preoccupation with my waistline and overall appearance and whispers, "A fat, sloppy image will diminish your credibility in ministry." Cunning.

I suspect I am not alone here. The narcissistic obsession with weight-watching in North America is a formidable ploy of the impostor. Despite the valid and important health factor, the amount of time and energy devoted to acquiring and maintaining a slender figure is staggering. No snack is unforeseen, no nibble spontaneous, no calorie uncharted, no strawberry left unaccounted. Professional guidance is procured, books and periodicals scrutinized, health spas subsidized, and the merits of the protein diet debated on national television. What is spiritual ecstasy compared to the exquisite pleasure of looking like a model? To paraphrase Cardinal Wolsey, "Would that I had served my God the way I have watched my waistline!"

The impostor demands to be noticed. His craving for compliments energizes his futile quest for carnal satisfaction. His bandages are his identity. Appearances are everything.

He convolutes *esse quam videri* (to be rather than to seem to be) so that “seeming to be” becomes his *modus operandi*.

Midway through reading a newly published book, I noticed that the author had quoted something I had written previously. Instantly I felt a flush of gratification and a rush of self-importance. As I turned to Jesus in prayer and contacted my true self, the ubiquitous impostor was exposed anew.

“Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self,” Thomas Merton observed. He went on to explain:

This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy. My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we were born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin.⁵

Merton's notion of sin focuses not primarily on individual sinful acts but on a fundamental option for a life of pretense. “There can only be two basic loves,” wrote Augustine, “the love of God unto the forgetfulness of self, or the love of self unto the forgetfulness and denial of God.” The fundamental option arises from the *core* of our being and incarnates itself in the specific choices of daily existence—either for the shadow self ruled by egocentric desires or for the true self hidden with Christ in God.

It is helpful to understand that not all human acts proceed from the core of our being. For instance, a husband makes a sincere choice in his marriage vows to love and honor his wife. But one hot summer day he loses his cool and gets into a blistering argument with her. Yet he does not retract his choice, because the anger arises from the periphery of his personality not from the depth of his soul. The act does not touch the heart of his existence or represent a total commitment of his person.

Impostors draw their identity not only from achievements but from interpersonal relationships. They want to stand well with people of prominence because that enhances a person's resume and sense of self-worth.

One lonely night in the Colorado Rockies, I heard this message: “Brennan, you bring your full presence and attention to certain members of the community but offer a diminished presence to others. Those who have stature, wealth, and charisma, those you

find interesting or charming or pretty or famous command your undivided attention, but people you consider plain or dowdy, those of lesser rank performing menial tasks, the unsung and celebrated are not treated with the same regard. This is not a minor matter to me, Brennan. The way you are with others every day, regardless of their status, is the true test of faith."

Later in the evening as I dozed off, contrasting images danced on the screen of my mind: Carlton Hayes, a magnificently chiseled athlete in his early twenties, six-foot-three, 185 pounds, bounces on a trampoline flashing the irresistible Bridleway smile. A crowd has gathered. He switches to skipping rope—a dazzling display of coordination, agility, and grace. The onlookers cheer. "Praise God," the athlete shouts.

Meanwhile, Moe, one of his retinue of attendants, approaches with a glass of Gatorade. In his early fifties, Moe is five-foot-four and paunchy. He wears a rumpled suit, shirt open at the collar, tie askew. Moe has a thinning sliver of matted hair extending from his temples to the back of his head where it disappears in a clump of gray-black hair. The little attendant is unshaven. His bulbous jowls and one glass eye cause the spectators' eyes to dart away.

"Pathetic little twerp," one man says.

"Just an obsequious, star-struck hanger-on," adds another.

Moe is neither. His heart is buried with Christ in the Father's love. He moves unselfconsciously through the crowd and extends the Gatorade gracefully to the hero. He is as comfortable as a hand in a glove with his servant role (that is how Jesus first revealed Himself to Moe and transformed his life). Moe feels safe with himself.

That night, Carlton Hayes will deliver the main address at the banquet of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, who are attending from all fifty states. He will also be honored with a Waterford crystal cup as the first eight-time Olympic gold medalist.

Five thousand people gather at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. Glitterati from the worlds of politics, sports, and show business are scattered throughout the room. As Hayes steps to the podium, the crowd is just finishing a sumptuous meal. The speaker's address abounds with references to the power of Christ and unabashed gratitude to God. Hearts are touched; men and women weep unashamedly, then give a standing ovation.

But behind the glossy delivery, Carlton's vacant stare reveals that his words do not inhabit his soul. Stardom has eroded his presence with Jesus. Intimacy with God has faded into the distance. The whispering of the Spirit has been drowned out by deafening applause.

Buoyed by success and the roar of the crowd, the Olympic hero moves easily from table to table. He ingratiates himself with everyone—from the waiters to the movie stars. Back at the Red Roof Inn, Moe eats his frozen TV dinner alone. He was not invited to the banquet at the Ritz-Carlton because, quite honestly, he just wouldn't fit in. Surely it wouldn't be fitting for a pot-bellied, glass-eyed, twerpy attendant to pull up a chair with the likes of Ronald Reagan, Charlton Heston, and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Moe sits down at the table in his room and closes his eyes. The love of the crucified Christ surges within him. His eyes fill with tears. "Thank You, Jesus," he whispers, as he peels the plastic top off his microwaved lasagna. He flips to Psalm 23 in his Bible.

I was in the dream, too. Where did I choose to spend that evening? My impostor rented a tux and we went to the Ritz. The next morning I awoke in the cabin at four a.m., showered and shaved, fixed a cup of coffee, and thumbed through the Scriptures. My eyes fell on a passage in 2 Corinthians: "From now onwards, therefore, we do not judge anyone by the standards of the flesh" (5:16). Ouch! I lug the false self around even in my dreams.

I relate to Charles Ashworth, the character in the Howatch novel, when his spiritual director comments, "Charles, would I be reading too much into your remarks if I deduced that liking and approval are very important to you?"

"Well, of course they're important," Ashworth exclaims. "Aren't they important to everyone? Isn't that what life's all about? Success is people liking and approving of you. Failure is being rejected. Everyone knows that."⁶

The sad irony is that the impostor cannot experience intimacy in any relationship. His narcissism excludes others. Incapable of intimacy with self and out of touch with his feelings, intuitions, and insight, the impostor is insensitive to the moods, needs, and dreams of others. Reciprocal sharing is impossible. The impostor has built life around achievements, success, busyness, and self-centered activities that bring gratification and praise from others. James Masterson, M.D., stated, "It is the nature of the false self to save us from knowing the truth about our real selves, from penetrating the deeper causes of our unhappiness, from seeing ourselves as we really are—vulnerable, afraid, terrified, and unable to let our real selves emerge."⁷

Why does the impostor settle for life in such a diminished form? First, because repressed memories from childhood that laid the pattern for self-deception are too painful to recall and thus remain carefully concealed. Faint voices from the past stir vague feelings of angry correction and implied abandonment. Masterson's summary is appropriate: "The false self has a highly skilled defensive radar whose purpose is to avoid feelings of rejection although sacrificing the need for intimacy. The system is constructed during the

first years of life, when it is important to detect what would elicit the mother's disapproval.”⁸

The second reason the impostor settles for less life is plain old cowardice. As a little one, I could justifiably cop a plea and claim that I was powerless and defenseless. But in the autumn of my life, strengthened by so much love and affection and seasoned by endless affirmation, I must painfully acknowledge that I still operate out of a fear-based center. I have been speechless in situations of flagrant injustice. While the impostor has performed superbly, I have assumed a passive role in relationships, stifled creative thinking, denied my real feelings, allowed myself to be intimidated by others, and then rationalized my behavior by persuading myself that the Lord wants me to be an instrument of peace At what price?

Merton said that a life devoted to the shadow is a life of sin. I have sinned in my cowardly refusal —out of fear of rejection—to think, feel, act, respond, and live from my authentic self. Of course, the impostor “argues relentlessly that the root of the problem is minor and should be ignored, that 'mature' men and women would not get so upset over something so trivial, that one's equilibrium should be maintained even if it means placing unreasonable limits on personal hopes and dreams and accepting life in a diminished form.”⁹

We even refuse to be our true self with God—and then wonder why we lack intimacy with Him. The deepest desire of our hearts is for union with God. From the first moment of our existence our most powerful yearning is to fulfill the original purpose of our lives —“to see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, follow Him more nearly.” We are made for God, and nothing less will really satisfy us.

C. S. Lewis could say that he was "surprised by joy," gripped by a desire that made "everything else that had ever happened... insignificant in comparison." Our hearts will ever be restless until they rest in Him. Jeffrey D. Imbach, in *The Recovery of Love*, wrote, "Prayer is essentially the expression of our heart longing for love. It is not so much the listing of our requests but the breathing of our own deepest request, to be united with God as fully as possible."¹⁰

Have you ever felt baffled by your internal resistance to prayer? By the existential dread of silence, solitude, and being alone with God? By the way you drag yourself out of bed for morning praise, shuffle off to worship with the sacramental slump of the terminally ill, endure nightly prayer with stoic resignation, knowing that “this too shall pass”?

Beware the impostor!

The false self specializes in treacherous disguise. He is the lazy part of self, resisting the

effort, asceticism, and discipline that intimacy with God requires. He inspires rationalizations, such as, "My work is my prayer; I'm too busy; prayer should be spontaneous so I just pray when I am moved by the Spirit." The false self's lame excuses allow us to maintain the status quo.

The false self dreads being alone, knowing "that if he would become silent within and without he would discover himself to be nothing. He would be left with nothing but his own nothingness, and to the false self which claims to be everything, such a discovery would be his undoing."¹¹

Obviously, the impostor is antsy in prayer. He hungers for excitement, craves some mood-altering experience. He is depressed when deprived of the spotlight. The false self is frustrated because he never hears God's voice. He cannot, since God sees no one there. Prayer is death to every identity that does not come from God. The false self flees silence and solitude because they remind him of death. Author Parker Palmer has stated, "Becoming totally quiet and unreachably alone are two of the signs that life has gone, while activity and lively communication not only signify life but help us evade the prospect that our life will someday cease."¹²

The impostor's frenetic lifestyle cannot bear the inspection of death because it confronts him with the unbearable truth: "There is no substance under the things with which you are clothed. You are hollow and your structure of pleasure and ambitions has no foundation. You are objectified in them. But they are all destined by their very contingency to be destroyed. And when they are gone there will be nothing left of you but your own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell you that you are your own mistake."¹³

The vivisection of the impostor's anatomy appears to be a masochistic exercise in self-flagellation. Isn't such morbid introspection self-defeating? Is this really necessary?

I maintain that it is not only necessary but indispensable for spiritual growth. The impostor must be called out of hiding, accepted, and embraced. He is an integral part of my total self. Whatever is denied cannot be healed. To acknowledge humbly that I often inhabit an unreal world, that I have trivialized my relationship with God, and that I am driven by vain ambition is the first blow in dismantling my glittering image. The honesty and willingness to stare down the false self dynamites the steel trapdoor of self-deception.

Peace lies in acceptance of truth. Any facet of the shadow self that we refuse to embrace becomes the enemy and forces us into defensive postures. As Simon Tug well has written, "And the discarded

pieces of ourselves will rapidly find incarnation in those around us. Not all hostility is due to this, but it is one major factor in our inability to cope with other people, that they represent to us precisely those elements in ourselves which we have refused to acknowledge.”¹⁴

As we come to grips with our own selfishness and stupidity, we make friends with the impostor and accept that we are impoverished and broken and realize that, if we were not, we would be God. The art of gentleness toward ourselves leads to being gentle with others—and is a natural prerequisite for our presence to God in prayer.

Hatred of the impostor is actually self-hatred. The impostor and I constitute one person. Contempt for the false self gives vent to hostility, which manifests itself as general irritability—an irritation at the same faults in others that we hate in ourselves. Self-hatred always results in some form of self-destructive behavior.

Accepting the reality of our sinfulness means accepting our authentic self. Judas could not face his shadow; Peter could. The latter befriended the impostor within; the former raged against him. "Suicide does not happen on a sudden impulse. It is an act that has been rehearsed during years of unconscious punitive behavior patterns."¹⁵

Years ago, Carl Jung wrote:

The acceptance of oneself is the essence of the whole moral problem and the epitome of a whole outlook on life. That I feed the hungry, that I forgive an insult, that I love my enemy in the name of Christ—all these are undoubtedly great virtues. What I do unto the least of my brethren, that I do unto Christ. But what if I should discover that the least amongst them all, the poorest of all the beggars, the most impudent of all the offenders, the very enemy himself—that these are within me, and that I myself stand in need of the alms of my own kindness—that I myself am the enemy who must be loved—what then? As a rule, the Christian's attitude is then reversed; there is no longer any question of love or long-suffering; we say to the brother within us "Raca," and condemn and rage against ourselves. We hide it from the world; we refuse to admit ever having met this least among the lowly in ourselves.¹⁶

When we accept the truth of what we really are and surrender it to Jesus Christ, we are enveloped in peace, whether or not we feel ourselves to be at peace. By that I mean the peace that passes understanding is not a subjective sensation of peace; if we are in Christ, we are in peace even when we feel no peace.

With a graciousness and an understanding of human weakness that only God can exhibit, Jesus liberates us from alienation and self-condemnation and offers each of us a new possibility. He is the Savior who saves us from ourselves. His Word is freedom. The Master says to us:

Burn the old tapes spinning 'round in your head that bind you up and lock you into a self-centered stereotype. Listen to the new song of salvation written for those who know that they are poor. Let go of your fear of the Father and your dislike of yourself. Remember the play *Don Quixote*? The Knight of the Mirrors lied to him when he said, "See yourself as you really are. Discover that you are not a noble knight, but an idiotic scarecrow of a man." And the Enchanter lies to you when he says, "Thou art no knight but a foolish pretender. Look in the mirror of reality. Behold things as they really are. What dost thou see? Naught but an aging fool" The Father of Lies twists the truth and distorts reality. He is the author of cynicism and skepticism, mistrust and despair, sick thinking and self-hatred. I am the Son of compassion. You belong to Me and no one will tear you from My hand.

Jesus discloses God's true feelings toward us. As we turn the pages of the Gospels, we discover that the people Jesus encounters there are you and me. The understanding and compassion He offers them, He also offers you and me.

On the twentieth and last day of my stay in the Colorado Rockies, I wrote this letter:

Good morning, impostor. Surely you are surprised by the cordial greeting. You probably expected, "Hello, you little jerk," since I have hammered you from day one of this retreat. Let me begin by admitting that I have been unreasonable, ungrateful, and unbalanced in my appraisal of you. (Of course, you are aware, puff of smoke, that in addressing you, I am talking to myself. You are not some isolated, impersonal entity living on an asteroid but a real part of me.)

I come to you today not with rod in hand but with an olive branch. When I was a little shaver and first knew that no one was there for me, you intervened and showed me where to hide. (In those Depression days of the thirties, you recall, my parents were doing the best they could with what they had just to provide food and shelter.)

At that moment in time, you were invaluable. Without your intervention I would have been overwhelmed by dread and paralyzed by fear. You were there for me and played a crucial, protective role in my development. Thank you.

When I was four years old, you taught me how to build a cottage. Remember the game? I would crawl under the covers from the head of the bed to the footrest and pull the sheets, blanket, and pillow over me—actually believing that no one could find me. I felt safe. I'm still amazed at how effectively it worked. My mind would think happy thoughts, and I would spontaneously smile and start to laugh under the covers. We built that cottage together because the world we inhabited was not a friendly place.

But in the construction process you taught me how to hide my real self from everyone and initiated a lifelong process of concealment, containment, and withdrawal. Your resourcefulness enabled me to survive. But then your malevolent side appeared and you started lying to me. "Brennan," you whispered, "if you persist in this folly of being yourself, your few long-suffering friends will hit the bricks, leaving you all alone. Stuff your feelings, shut down your memories, withhold your opinions, and develop social graces so you'll fit in wherever you are."

And so, the elaborate game of pretense and deception began. Because it worked I raised no objection. As the years rolled by, you-I got strokes from a variety of sources. We were elated and concluded the game must go on.

But you needed someone to bridle you and rein you in. I had neither the perception nor the courage to tame you, so you continued to rumble like Sherman through Atlanta, gathering momentum along the way. Your appetite for attention and affirmation became insatiable. I never confronted you with the lie because I was deceived myself.

The bottom line, my pampered playmate, is that you are both needy and selfish. You need care, love, and a safe dwelling place. On this last day in the Rockies my gift is to take you where, unknowingly, you have longed to be—into the presence of Jesus. Your days of running riot are history. From now on, you slow down, slow very down.

In His presence, I notice that you have already begun to shrink. Wanna know somethin', little guy? You're much more attractive that way. I am nicknaming you "Pee-Wee? Naturally you are not going to roll over suddenly and die. I know you will get disgruntled at times and start to act out, but the longer you spend time in the presence of Jesus, the more accustomed you grow to His face, the less adulation you will need because you will have discovered for yourself that He is Enough. And in the Presence, you will delight in the discovery of what it means to live by grace and not by performance.

Your friend,
Brennan