

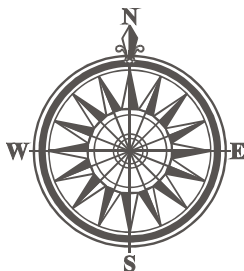
# NEW LIFE

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# NAVIGATOR

*Navigator: Skillful in the art of navigation; this art comprehends not only the management of the sail, but the directing and measuring of the course of the vessel by the laws of geometry, or by astronomical principles and observations; so as to direct one's course from one place to another; the method of determining position, (where I am) course, (where am I going) and distance traveled (how am I doing).*

Noah Webster



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*The articles and resources included in this publication reflect a broad spectrum of biblically-based perspectives on revival and spiritual awakening. However, New Life Ministries and the Editorial Board of Navigator do not necessarily endorse the entire philosophy and ministry of all its contributing writers.*

*Many times we come across powerful articles that we feel speak to the issues we face in the church today but many of these were written long ago and the author and his ministry are not “well known.” Therefore we do not endorse the full ministry of these individuals, we simply are passing along the good bread we have found.*

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# DON'T BEAM US UP SCOTTIE

WE'VE GOT TO LEAVE THE SAFE, SECURE  
ENVIRONMENT OF THE ENTERPRISE

by David Rutherford

The giant, white starship fills the screen, then cruises powerfully into the black depths of space. On board the Enterprise everything is perfectly clean and pure. No one perspires, no one leaves dirty dishes in the sink. People rarely cry.

The characters are largely untouched by the outside world. A planet may explode, and only a slight frown of puzzlement or dismay will crease the captain's brow. Everyone is competent. Everything is under control.

Occasionally in their quest for justice the intrepid crew ventures into a hostile world. As the matter transporter beams them into the most forbidding environments, they are secure in the knowledge that at the slightest hint of trouble they can be saved by uttering the famous phrase, "Beam us up, Scotty!" Immediately they are removed from the scene of potential trouble, pain, or anguish and restored to the pristine security of the ship. A change of clothes and they are back in control.

## POINTY EARS AND FUNNY LEOTARDS

Star Trek could be a parable describing Christian involvement in the world. We spend much of our lives building and securing our own version of the Enterprise, a lifestyle full of nice people and positive experiences. Occasionally we venture out from the safety

of our spiritual base into the murky atmosphere of this messy world. Our goal is to swoop down on one or more of the unfortunate citizens of the world and bring them back to our safe, spiritual shelter where they will become as nice, clean-cut, and upstanding as ourselves. For this sort of task a transporter beam would certainly come in handy.

There are problems, however, with a “Star Trek” approach to Christian life and ministry. One is that most don’t want to be beamed up. From their point of view, we are the ones with the pointy ears and the funny leotards. They perceive correctly that we are not really interested in understanding them or caring for them in a costly way. They wonder what planet we come from and how we could possibly understand what they are going through.

The “Star Trek” mentality also encourages us to believe in our own superiority. We give the impression to the lost and to one another that we have our act together, that we are basically free from struggles and practically without sin. We forget that we are a people who have experienced mercy. That our ministry is by grace. That the treasure of the gospel is in jars of clay to show that the all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

## EMBRACING OUR WORLD

After Jesus had called His disciples, He did an unusual thing. He took them with Him into the world. Not the nice world of spiritual retreats and controlled learning environments, but the world of prostitutes, hypocrites, and the demon-possessed. The world of disease, death, and mourning. The world of the greedy and corrupt. A world of late nights, raging storms, and responsibilities. They watched Jesus entering strongly into that world, healing, teaching, meeting needs, touching, showing compassion, rebuking.

The security He offered them was not in isolation, but in a relationship of dependence on Him. The context of that relationship was the real situations of life in their world. Even as they faced His leaving them physically, He prayed, “not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (Jn. 17:15).


As followers of Jesus Christ, God calls us into the world, living out distinctive lives among people who do not know Him (1 Pet. 2:12). We are aliens and strangers, staying for a while in a world we cannot call home. Our true home is elsewhere. But for the course of our lives we belong here, just as Jesus belonged here.

The particular circumstances and experiences of our lives matter. Our work, our relationships with others, the issues facing our society all have significance. As confusing and painful as they sometimes are, they are to be embraced rather than avoided. They are not just things we dabble in while we are waiting for Heaven. They are the arena in which our relationship with God grows, where we fulfill His purposes for our lives, and where we have the opportunity to touch profoundly the lives of other people.

Embracing our world may mean honestly facing painful realities about our lives—perhaps sin or failure, sickness, unemployment, bereavement, or loneliness. If we have never allowed ourselves to struggle and experience God’s comfort in these things, we will have little to say to a hurting world.

It will mean compassionate involvement with the lost, entering into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings. This could mean really listening to the office moaner over lunch or inviting the single parent next door to a family activity. It might involve getting together with some friends and confronting an injustice or caring for the needy. We know that when we do these things we often come away hurt, tired, confused, perhaps out of a job—but always hungry to meet with God.

## SECURITY IN JESUS

God calls His people to seek their security and comfort not in avoidance of the world, but in a relationship with Him. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). Our friends, workmates, and neighbors don’t need a super Christian, but someone who shares their humanity and knows the life-giving touch of God in everyday life. Let’s keep working at throwing open the doors of the Enterprise and entering strongly into the world and work to which God has called us. 

# MAKING GOD ALMOST ALL POWERFUL

by John Acuff

I went ahead and figured out how powerful God is.

Considering that this is probably a question philosophers and theologians have struggled with for thousands of years, that's pretty nice of me. Who knew one day a random guy would figure it out and share it for free. What can I say? I'm a giver.

So here it is:

God is slightly less powerful than Mutton Hollow Chevy.

That's it. That's the answer. If you have some other things you need to go do or other guys you want to read you can probably skip out right now, having been exposed to that little gem of knowledge. But if you've never heard of Mutton Hollow Chevy, who is slightly more powerful than God, allow me to explain.

When I started my ministry website, I had to go with a .net address because someone already had .com. A small church themed online gift shop had that web address. They sold puzzles of Jesus and what not. I felt like .net was not nearly as cool as .com but oh well, that was what I had available.

Apparently they went out of business or sold their domain to someone else though because now, if you type the .com version of my site, you will be taken to Mutton Hollow Chevy, a small car dealer that specializes in 1955-1957 Chevy parts.

I'd like to say that when I found out that, once again, some-

one, this time Mutton Hollow had scooped me, my first thought was “aw shucks!” But that would be a lie.

My first thought was more like this:

“I am so dumb! How could I let that happen? If I was smarter and more web savvy that wouldn’t have happened. When my book comes out, people who don’t know I have a .net are going to accidentally type .com and never find me and I’ll never sell any books and never get a second book deal and will waste this opportunity that God has given me. It’s all over. It is all so over.”

I know that probably sounds dumb, but it’s true. I felt sick to my stomach and kind of panicky and really ashamed of myself. And I’ve felt that way before about other things, but do you know what I don’t ever do? I don’t ever take thoughts like that to their natural conclusion. I don’t ever spend time reflecting on what that thought says about me and what it says about God.

This time I did.

And do you know what I found? If that thought is true. If Mutton Hollow Chevy has somehow sunk the John Acuff ship by grabbing the .com I really needed, if they’ve effectively limited the size of this ministry, if they’ve dashed the opportunity to reach people for the Lord, then Mutton Hollow Chevy is slightly more powerful than God.

Don’t get me wrong, He’s big and mighty and “Almost All Powerful.” He set my ministry in motion, but in a late game changing move, Mutton Hollow Chevy showed up and limited even Him. He had plans that were pretty amazing, but unfortunately they involved me getting the .com address and since I don’t have that, God is limited too. The dreams He had just got a pair of Mutton Hollow-sized handcuffs put on them.

That’s ridiculous and I hope right now you are laughing both at the shallowness of my faith and my dedication to repeating the phrase “Mutton Hollow” which is delightful to say I don’t care who you are. But I promise you’ve done the same thing before in your own life.

At some point, you've had a fear you thought was more powerful than God.

You lost your job and worried that unemployment was more powerful than God.

You lost a boyfriend and worried that being alone was more powerful than God.

You got in credit debt and worried that Visa was more powerful than God.

Your dream did not turn out the right way and you thought the circumstances were more powerful than God.

It's so easy to do this, but today, as new worries crop up, I'm trying to do things a little differently. With each new fear, I'm trying to stop long enough and ask myself a simple question: "Is this more powerful than God?"

Is Mutton Hollow Chevy more powerful than God?

Is a possible layoff at work more powerful than God?

Is \_\_\_\_\_ more powerful than God?

So far, every answer has come back with a resounding no. I still worry. I'll still walk through the hollow of the shadow of death from time to time, but with that question and a God that loves to answer it, I think I'm going to be alright.

And Mutton Hollow, please know that when you're ready to give me that .com I, much like the band Journey, will be waiting right here for you with open arms.

How would you write this question today about your own life?

Finish this sentence:

Is \_\_\_\_\_ more powerful than God? 

# AS YOU WISH

DISCOVER THE ONLY PRAYER  
YOU'LL EVER NEED

by John Ortberg

On the bookshelf of my daughter Mallory's bedroom sits a volume called *The Princess Bride*. It was the basis of a quirky little movie that my family has seen more times than I can count. The book comes from the pen of William Goldman, though he pretends he just translated it from a Florinese manuscript by an S. Morgenstern that set records for the most weeks on a Florinese best-seller list. It took a long time to convince my daughter that there was no S. Morgenstern, no Florinese language, and, sadly, no country named Florin.

## THE GREATEST PRAYER

There is one line that lies at the heart of the book's story—and at the heart of your story as well. It is spoken when the story begins and when it ends. It is a kind of prayer. In fact, it is the greatest prayer Jesus Himself ever prayed. If we were ever able to pray it truly and continually, it is the only prayer you and I would ever need. My friend Gary Moon tells it this way:

As the movie opens, we see the heroine going about chores on a farm. Her name is Buttercup. (I know, but I still like the movie.) Soon we meet a young man who works on the farm and answers to the name Farm Boy.

Whenever Buttercup asks Farm Boy to do something for her, he always replies, "As you wish." That's all he ever says to her.

As they grow into their hormones, Buttercup seems to be developing a crush on Farm Boy. One day as he is about to leave the room, she asks him to fetch her a pitcher, which is within easy reach for her. Farm Boy walks over, then stares into her eyes, lifts the pitcher, and whispers: “As you wish.”

In that moment, returning his gaze, Buttercup realizes that every time he has said, “As you wish,” he was really saying, “I love you.”

For many centuries, those wisest among us about the spiritual life have insisted that this one line is the door that opens the heart to the presence of God. There is no greater expression of love than a freely submitted will. As you wish.

Jean Pierre de Caussade writes, “Every moment, and in respect of everything, we must say like Paul, ‘Lord, what should I do? Let me do everything you wish.’”

Jesus said, As the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you—If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.—Jn. 15:9-10, NASB

Lawrence writes, “Let us often remember, dear friend, that our sole occupation in life is to please God.”

“At the heart of communion with God,” Gary Moon tells us, “is the whisper, ‘As you wish.’”

There are moments when I remember to pray that prayer. They are not usually dramatic. The tax man emails us with the good news that Uncle Sam is sending back some of our money, and it occurs to me that I could be generous with it. I’m sitting in a meeting at work, and the thought strikes my mind that I could be quiet for a few minutes and look for someone else’s idea to cheer on. I’ve been traveling for a week, and I’m in a strange airport and feeling lonely; I get a sudden impulse to open the Bible and ask God to meet with me there. And He does.

There are other times when it doesn’t even enter my mind to

say, “As you wish.” I’m not necessarily being defiant, just oblivious. There are times when I’m not sure what God wishes me to do, and I just have to muddle through. And there are times when I simply don’t want to pray it—when I choose not to pray it.

C. S. Lewis wrote that the day is coming when every soul will adopt one of two postures before God: either joyful surrender or defiant separation. One day every being will say either “Thy will be done,” or “My will be done.” And the reality is that—at least to some small degree—our hearts are always assuming one or the other of these postures. From one moment to the next we make choices: What will I do next? How will I treat this person? What will I do with this money? Where will I allow this temptation to lead me?

The heart that learns to say, “As you wish,” from one moment to the next opens itself to the Power of the Universe. It does not matter whether our task is great or small or whether we are famous or obscure. Anne Lamott has a wonderful thought: “The Gulf Stream can pass through a straw, if the straw aligns itself with the Gulf Stream.”

## CONDUCTORS AND RESISTORS

An analogy from the field of electricity can help us think about our response to God. The difference between a conductor and a resistor can be put like this: A conductor is willing to let go. Floating around the periphery of its atoms are electrons that can quite easily pass from one atom to another. They are more or less free agents. So a conductor has what we might call a generosity of spirit when it comes to electrons. In previous times writers used to speak of this as a sense of detachment. Ignatius of Loyola said we are to cultivate a sense of indifference. The idea is not that we should be apathetic about all our circumstances. Instead, it is that our deepest desire is for God and His kind of life, and every other desire has to take a backseat to this one absolute quest.

A resistor, by contrast, does not want to let go. It hangs onto its little electrons. It clings to the status quo. It is afraid to let go because it wants to keep its little possessions intact. And so it does. But the resistor never knows much power.

The secret of the conductor is that it is not generating its own power. The conductor is not particularly strong or clever; it is simply a conduit. It is open and receptive to the flow of current that can change the world from darkness to light.

The resistor prays, “Leave me alone.”

The conductor prays, “As you wish.”

Each prayer gets answered.

We live in a spiritually charged universe. The flow of the Holy Spirit is all around us. We did not invent it, but it has now become fully available. Jesus once said, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him” (Jn. 7:38). John’s gospel explains that Jesus was talking about the Spirit.

We do not have much power in our wills, but we can choose whether we will be resistors or conductors. And our prayer will be answered.

It is striking how often resistors and conductors get paired up in Scripture. Often the people with the greatest outward power are the ones who resist, and those who look less significant end up being the conduits. Pharaoh was a resistor: God’s power could have flowed through him, but he said no. Moses was a conductor: He had many inadequacies and shortcomings, but from the burning bush to his final moments on Mount Pisgah, where he looked out over the Promised Land, he learned to say, “As you wish.”

King Saul was an impressive man, head and shoulders above the crowd, but he shut his heart from the flow. David was very human, embarrassingly fallible, but the flow of the Spirit through him was at times incandescent. Haman had the power, humanly speaking, but his hostile heart was a circuit breaker. Esther—a woman regarded as just a pretty ornament by the king and those in power—was a bolt of lightning.

Herod was called “the Great,” but he held tight to his throne and resisted the Messiah. John the Baptist was a hermit in the desert,

but in his self-abandonment (“I must decrease”) a power flowed that even his beheading could not stem.


The ultimate conductor, of course, was Jesus Himself. Frank Laubach notes that 47 times in the Gospel of John alone Jesus said He was “under God’s orders” and that He did and said everything His Father commanded. “He was listening every moment of the day to His invisible companion and saying, ‘Yes.’”

## THE GLOWING PICKLE

I did an electrical experiment in church one time. I brought in a scientist with a Ph.D. so that if someone got electrocuted, it wouldn’t be me. We turned off all the lights, hooked up an ordinary pickle to some wires, and then passed an electrical current through it. The pickle glowed. It gave light to a room with thousands of people. It was not a huge amount of light—not enough to read by. But there was light.

Many people believe that the flow of the Holy Spirit is reserved for spiritual giants like Billy Graham and Charles Spurgeon. But throughout history God has caused His power to flow through the most unlikely people: a prostitute named Rahab, a con man named Jacob, a cheat named Zacchaeus.

This was the miracle of the early church. As the believers met for prayer, “the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:31), because the ordinary becomes extraordinary when filled with the power of God. So the next time you feel inadequate or not very gifted, remember that even a pickle can glow if it stays plugged in to the flow. Remember: “The Gulf Stream can pass through a straw, if the straw aligns itself with the Gulf Stream.”

It is God’s job to send the flow of the Spirit into our lives. When we have thoughts that prompt us toward the fruit of the Spirit—promptings to express love to someone, celebrations of inner joy, the conviction that we are at peace—these are all surges of the Spirit’s current. My job is simply to offer the surrender of a conductor: “As you wish.” 

# FREE ADMISSION

by Sandy Sheppard

Searching for an easy bread recipe for dinner, I grabbed an old church cookbook and skimmed through it until I came across something that caught my eye: Nutritious Oatmeal Muffins. Sounds good, I thought, quickly assembling the ingredients. I grated an apple and a carrot for the batter, filled muffin cups, and set the oven timer. But when I pulled the muffins out of the oven, what I saw made me groan aloud.

The muffins looked like hockey pucks.

Though they had failed to rise, I decided to try one, thinking they might taste all right. I was wrong. There was no sugar in the muffins! I opened up the cookbook again, wondering, Who's to blame for this fiasco?

At the end of the baking instructions I found the name of a woman I knew well: Sandy Sheppard. Hey, that's me. I had submitted the recipe several years ago and had no recollection of it! I quickly reread the list of ingredients to see if anything had been omitted from the cookbook. Nope, they were all in the text, including the baking soda and sugar I had left out when I'd hastily mixed the batter.

I put the muffins in a basket, covered them with a napkin, and set them on the table anyway. When my husband picked one up, he furrowed his brow and asked me, "What happened to these?"

“Well,” I said. “It’s a long story.”

The whole family laughed at the incident. But Rick and I knew the truth of the matter: I have a hard time admitting my mistakes. If Rick brings up one of my faults in a conversation, I’m likely to answer defensively, “But you . . .”

## ARTFUL DODGERS

Through the years I’ve learned that I’m not the only one who has a problem with passing the buck. My methods are pretty obvious, but some people use more subtle tactics.

Some time ago, I was listening to a politician on a talk show who confessed to doing something wrong years ago. He described his failure with these words: “I made a mistake.” The act he committed was more than a mistake; it had been clearly illegal. Yet he tried to understate its severity by passing it off as a simple error in judgment.

Others are experts at the “nonapology,” in which they artfully place responsibility on the one wronged, adding insult to injury: “I’m sorry you felt hurt by what I said.” “I’m sorry you . . .” is as bad as no apology at all, because the person apologizing still refuses to take responsibility for his actions. A truly repentant person would say, “I’m sorry I . . .”

In addition, I’ve observed a growing tendency in our society to claim we are victims—of our environment, our upbringing, our genes, the political or moral “climate,” and so on. Unfortunately, many Christians have joined this throng of the wronged.

But is this eagerness to duck responsibility really a new problem? Genesis 3 reveals this tendency dates back to the Garden of Eden. When God asked Adam if he had eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam replied, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Genesis 3:12). Then God questioned Eve, and she answered, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (Genesis 3:13). Neither wanted to accept responsibility for disobeying a direct order from God. Both tried to blame someone else.

## SWIMMING IN DENIAL

The tendency to deny responsibility is not just a minor personality flaw that can be ignored. God's Word describes the serious consequences of blaming others for my sins.

I am guilty of hypocrisy. When I pass the buck, I am trying to shift the judgment I deserve onto someone else. Jesus said, Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the 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.—Matthew 7:3, 5

Although this passage doesn't specifically refer to blaming someone else for an act I have committed, it clearly commands me to admit my faults before focusing on others' shortcomings.

I deceive myself. "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). The longer I try to absolve myself of blame, the more difficult it becomes to be honest with myself about my sins. Though I may be tempted to excuse this habit as a seemingly insignificant character flaw, it is a crack in the foundation of my integrity that could lead to a greater moral collapse if I fail to deal with it.

I call God a liar. "If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives" (1 John 1:10). When I blame others for my shortcomings, I am essentially claiming that I have not sinned. But John says this dishonesty stands in opposition to the kind of honesty believers are called to exercise.

## MOVING BEYOND BLAME

When my son, Scott, was barely two, he closed the door into our living room, shutting himself out. The knob was difficult to turn, so he began pounding on the door. As I let him in, I asked, "Scott, did you shut the door?" He answered innocently, "Finger did it." Then, looking sternly at the offending member, he commanded, "No do dat again, OK?" I couldn't help but laugh. Here was a child still in diapers who was already creatively trying to circumvent blame. Since that day I have been convinced that we are all born with the inclination to blame others for our misdeeds. But until recently I avoided dealing with the issue in my own life.

Last fall I was with a group of my girlfriends and one of them made a statement that stabbed at my conscience: “When my husband makes a comment about something I have done, I am learning to look beyond his tone of voice. Maybe he doesn’t always speak in the tone I would like him to use, but God is showing me that I need to look for the truth of what he says, despite the way he says it.”

I felt God speaking to me through her honest admission. I had long been aware of my blame-dodging tendency, especially in my marriage. But I hadn’t done anything about it. Too often I reacted to my husband’s tone by retaliating with accusations about his attitude instead of admitting that he spoke truthfully about issues in my life that needed to be addressed. That simple revelation from another wife prodded me to take a long, painful look at myself and to seek positive methods for change.

God showed me three ways I could begin to accept responsibility for my actions.

I needed to admit my problem to myself. God could have helped me deal with this problem long ago if I had been willing to admit it to myself. But I kept sweeping it under the carpet and hoping it would not be too evident. After 27 years of marriage, that pile of dirt made quite a hill, and I kept tripping over it. God used two people, my friend and my husband, to show me the truth. I finally decided it was time to deal with the dirt under the rug.

I needed to confess the problem to God and pray for His help. After I admitted that I had a problem, I began to confess my habit of deflecting blame. I realized I needed to make some major changes, and I started by praying that God would help me conquer the problem. Regarding honesty about his sin, David wrote: Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord”—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.—Psalm 32:5

I, too, am beginning to discover the freedom that is found in honestly confessing my faults instead of hiding them.

I needed to make myself accountable to someone. I asked Rick to confront me when I passed the buck: “I know I often put


the blame on others instead of accepting it myself. Please tell me to ‘remember the muffins’ when I try to dodge responsibility.”

On Christmas day I watched while my 14-year-old son unwrapped a computer game for young children. I realized immediately I had accidentally switched two gifts: His five-year-old sister would soon open up a Star Wars game. “Looks like someone got the tags mixed up,” I said with a laugh.

Rick grinned. “What do you mean, someone? ‘Remember the muffins?’”

“You’re right. I mixed up the presents.”

My confession to my husband was another important step in dealing with my problem. As James wrote, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

Maybe someday I’ll stop passing the buck. In the meantime, I am becoming more conscious of the temptation to blame others. Last week I spilled some juice and resisted the urge to ask, “Who put the top back on the pitcher this way?” Instead I kept my mouth shut. When I told Rick about the incident later, he joyfully proclaimed, “There is a God.” . 

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## INNER INVINCIBILITY

*Take My yoke upon you and learn from me.  
Matthew 11:29*

The only way to know the strength of God is to take the yoke of Jesus upon us and to learn from Him. It is definitely a crime for a Christian to be weak in God’s strength.

# DISCOUNTING OUR SMALL STEPS TOWARD STUPID

by Jon Acuff

A few weeks ago, I called one of my accountability partners and confessed that I'd been listening to techno music lately.

Whoa, Footloose's John Lithgow, what's wrong with techno music?

Nothing. There's inherently nothing wrong with techno music or electronic music or drum and bass or a million other iterations of that genre of music.

And twelve years ago, when I was in college in Birmingham, Alabama I loved techno music.

If the question is, "Yeah but did you ever go to a rave and wear reflective pants?" The answer is "Yes."

Did I spin and dance around with glowsticks in my hands? Yes.

Did I have futuristic sunglasses that looked like I might be driving a motorcycle from the year 2065 that can also travel up the side of walls? Yes.

We could play that game all day, but simply put, I jumped into rave culture with both feet, which meant that on some weekends, I took ecstasy from strangers, danced in a dark warehouse for eight hours and then crawled my way back outside into a sunshine that felt accusingly bright and painful.

Fast forward twelve years and life is different. I am different. Who I know God to be is different. But on a Tuesday afternoon a few weeks ago, I noticed that techno music had crept back into my life.

Again, there's nothing wrong with techno, but for me, it's the soundtrack of a period in my life that is pretty dark. And when I listen to a lot of techno, there's a part of me that wants to "reminisce" about that time. Despite the hurt and the pain and the emptiness that came from those moments, there's still a part of me that likes to put rose colored glasses on.

And perhaps bigger than that, there's still a part of me that wants to hide. When things get tough, when the pressures of trying to fulfill a lifelong goal like writing a book start to pile up a little, I still reflex to a degree into my old ways and try to hide. So for me, techno music becomes an escape. A chance to close out the world, close out my day and be surrounded by a steady, faceless, wordless beat.

For me, techno is a small step toward stupid.

Have you ever noticed those in your own life? This is the first time I saw techno that way. What usually happens is that I listen to a lot of techno. I start to pull away from friends and family. I get more secretive with how I'm spending my time. I make small bad decisions that grow into large bad decisions. And I start hiding deeper and deeper in the shiny objects I used to care so much about when I used to care about nothing.

Then a few months later, I crash. It all falls apart and with a great degree of surprise I proclaim, "How did I end up here? I never saw that coming."

Meanwhile, all along, I was taking small steps toward stupid.

You know who else did that? The prodigal son.

For most of my life I just assumed that the son, upon getting all his inheritance from his father, immediately left the farm on a fast track to hookers and pig sty living. But that's not what the Bible says. In fact, in Luke 15:13, the moment after he got his money is described this way: "And not many days after the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living." (KJV)

I've written about this before because it blows me away. He didn't leave instantly. You get the sense that he packed his stuff. He got his things together and prepared for the long journey deep into the heart of stupid. He took small steps.

I don't know if you discount your small steps toward stupid, but if you do, if there are patterns you're missing, I challenge you to think about them today. What are they? What are your small steps toward stupid? Techno is one of mine, but I'll go first with a couple more of mine in the hope that they'll spark some of your own.

## TWO MORE OF MY SMALL STEPS TOWARD STUPID:

### 1. MY WEIGHT

I don't think I've talked about this before, but my weight fluctuates by about 30 pounds. That might not seem like a lot, but going from 135 pounds to 165 pounds is a fairly big shift. When things feel chaotic, I tend to control what I can and end up not eating enough and being skinny. After a period of that, I tend to let everything go and pendulum swing back the other direction and gain so much weight that the button of my pants could spring off and kill someone.

### 2. MY QUIET TIME

When I'm taking small steps toward stupid I tend to stretch

the boundaries of what “quiet time with God” really means. For instance, last June and July I started to lie to myself and say, “Well since my writing is about God, then my writing kind of counts as a quiet time.” That’s not true, but when I’m headed toward stupid, my quiet time tends to disappear.

Those are a few small steps toward stupid I take. Yours will be different. Gaining weight and listening to techno might mean nothing in your life but chances are, you have your own small steps toward stupid.

What are they?

And how can we all stop taking them?

Keep your eyes open. 

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# NO THANKS

WE DON'T ALWAYS RECOGNIZE GOD'S GIFTS

by Christie Eastman

This year “winter” hit Bangladesh hard. Though the tropical winter here doesn’t much resemble the frigid months I grew up with in the American Midwest, it is nonetheless cold. Millions of Dhaka residents live in makeshift shelters of cardboard, plastic bags, and scraps of cloth. They have no access to blankets or warm clothing. Their children often have only one set of clothing—or none at all. For these people, Bangladeshi winters can be treacherous.

As the temperatures dropped, I began to notice the babies perched on the hips of destitute women who tapped on my car

window at intersections. Most of these children were naked. After returning from the market one day, I decided it was time to cull my son's wardrobe, which was overstocked with gifts and hand-me-downs from friends and family. I wanted to be able to help some of those in such desperate need.

Sorting through Jacob's clothes, I remembered how grateful I had felt when the gifts had poured in at his birth. Many people showered us with love and wanted to celebrate our joy. So I set aside some clothes and blankets to keep for our son and then started another pile of clothing to give away. I packed two sets for distribution, one to put in the backseat of our car for easy access and one to keep in the trunk for restocking.

Then began the more difficult task of distribution. Perhaps without giving it enough thought, I began handing out clothing somewhat randomly to women who toted babies as they worked the smog-filled city streets for money and other gifts. As usual, small crowds approached me when I got out of the car. The numbers grew quickly whenever I gave something to a woman carrying a baby. Usually a tangle of hands would reach up, trying to grab the clothes out of my hands.

I found it hard not to tense up as people pressed in against me, shouting and grabbing. Sometimes I shouted back in frustration, telling everybody to back off and give me some room. But, I reminded myself, at least that baby has a chance to be warm tonight.

One morning as I walked from the church to our car, several people from a nearby slum approached me asking for bakshish, or handouts. I said no to all of them except one woman who carried a scantily clad infant. The little boy had hollow cheeks and a dull expression as he listlessly watched the world around him.

The woman sauntered up to me and demanded that I give her something. She squinted at me and then looked over my son and our car. Her expression said, "You rich American, you have everything. I deserve something from you." As I looked at the woman and her baby, I thought, I'll just open the trunk and get the child something.

I chose a warm sweatshirt that looked as if it would fit the little boy. I knew it would keep him warm, even if the woman carrying him was pushy and rude. I held out the sweatshirt to her and smiled from my heart. Her eyes shifted from me to what was in my hand. She took the sweatshirt from me, stuffed it under her arm, and said, “I want money. Give me bakshish.”

Suddenly my face flushed red, and my heart rate jumped. I opened my mouth and stuttered in her language, “I have given you something, sister.” I felt as if she had just spit in my face. She smiled smugly and inspected the sweatshirt. She’s probably figuring how much she could get by selling it, I thought cynically. I climbed into the car and drove off, my heart darkening with anger. I could not comprehend how anyone so wretched and desperate could shrug at such a gift. How could she demand something different and then walk away without a word of thanks or any indication of the gift’s value to her?

I thought about the baby’s sad face all the way home. When I pictured him in the sweatshirt, my anger began to dissipate. But in its place came the startling and unexpected realization that I was not altogether different from the woman whose ungrateful behavior seemed so unthinkable to me. At times I act exactly the same way when I go to God with my wishes and petitions. I know what I want, and my requests become demands. Too often I ignore the prayers He’s already answered.

Yet every day God gives me gifts I do not deserve, even though I don’t always use them wisely or even recognize His generosity. I stuff them under my arm and rudely continue to pursue the other things I believe I must have.

How God must weep when we snatch up His gifts without a word of thanks and then greedily demand more. Even so, He never stops giving. God’s love is beyond the pettiness of our ingratitude. His gifts are perfect, given to us as if we were the innocent ones who needed to be kept warm on cold winter nights.



# WHERE'S THE JOY?

IT MAY BE CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

by John Miller

My closest Jewish friend in college nicknamed me “Simchah”—the ancient Hebrew word for joy.

It was no secret in our dorm that I laughed often and found a delight in daily circumstances that somehow escaped many others. One Christian friend confided: “The non-Christians here have a saying about you: ‘Either Paul is totally crazy, or he’s on to something we don’t know about.’”

They were right. I was on to something—I should say Someone—they didn’t know about, though I tried often enough to introduce them to Him. Only a short time before, I had met the Lord, and He had become the great Fountain of my joy. Whenever I sensed His presence, a deep delight that I couldn’t contain welled up within me.

In the more than 20 years since, joy has rarely been far from me, because Jesus has remained close by. That’s not to say that I haven’t known considerable grief, sadness, and struggle. Nor could I even say that I’ve been happy most of that time. But I’ve known an abiding joy nonetheless. When Christian friends ask about the secret of that joy, I share with them two important lessons that have

made all the difference: First, I've learned not to confuse joy with happiness; and second, I've discovered that if we want joy, we must abandon the pursuit of it, and go looking for God instead.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAPPINESS AND JOY

People often equate happiness with joy, but the two are quite different. Our best clue to the meaning of happiness is found in one of its close synonyms, contentment, which has the same root as the word contain. To be content is to contain or possess what we want. So to be happy is to be satisfied, either because we have what we desire, or because we've given up the desire for what we don't have.

Happiness, then, is not so much a feeling as it is a condition or state of being. It's a calming of the heart's activity. Jesus spoke, for example, of the shepherd who is happy to find a lost sheep (Mt. 18:13). Once the shepherd obtains what he wants, his activity toward that goal ceases. The writer to the Hebrews told Christians to be happy (or content) by giving up the desire to obtain more than what they had (Heb. 13:5).

We can see why the pursuit of happiness is the unhappiest of pursuits: We can't always have what we want; when we get what we want, we may lose it; and even if we don't lose it, the sense of satisfaction may fade as we find ourselves attracted to something else.

That's why it's so important not to confuse joy with happiness. The Lord has promised that joy is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). But He never promised that we would have everything we want in this life. If we want to discover joy, we won't find it by continually striving to arrange the circumstances of our lives in a satisfying way. We must look for it elsewhere.

Like happiness, joy brings us pleasure; so what exactly is the difference between the two? One simple definition of joy that might distinguish the two experiences is this: Joy is the sense of delight that arises within us in the presence of someone or something we love.

While happiness is a condition or state of being, joy is a re-

sponse. Joy depends, not on our acquisition of something, but rather on our encounter with something. Happiness possesses; joy appreciates. Happiness grasps; joy beholds.

This understanding of joy is found throughout the Bible. For example, joy is the appreciative response of a father to the wisdom he finds in a cherished son (Prov. 15:20). It's the exultation of someone who loves righteousness upon seeing justice reign in the land (Prov. 21:15). It's the pleasure taken by a citizen of Jerusalem in the beauty of that beloved city (Ps. 48:1–2). In each of these cases, people aren't feeling content because they have acquired something (happiness); they're taking delight in their encounter with something they love (joy).

## THE ORDER OF JOY

Joy represents the culmination of a sequence of events inside us: We see goodness; we recognize it for what it is; we love it; and we enjoy it. Seeing, knowing, loving, enjoying—that is what we might call the “order of joy.”

Jesus spoke of this connection between vision and rejoicing when He comforted His disciples on the night of His betrayal. He told them that He would be taken away, but that they would see Him again; and when they saw Him, their grief would turn to joy (Jn. 16:16–22). For us as for the disciples, joy comes when we see the Lord, because it's the natural result of being in the presence of Someone we love.

In heaven, we will eternally behold the face of God as He is, without anything to obstruct the view (1 Jn. 3:2). When at last we see Him perfectly, we will know Him and love Him perfectly, and we will enjoy Him without measure (1 Cor. 13:12).

In the meantime, God is wooing us, drawing us to Himself with glimpses of goodness in this world that point us toward Him as their Source. Just as Jesus' disciples rejoiced because they continued to see Him after His ascension—through the works He did by His Spirit—we, too, can see Him if we're willing to look for Him. The resulting vision of God in times of trouble and in our everyday lives can cause joy to well up within us, a foretaste of the joy of heaven.

## LOOKING FOR GOD IN DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

With all this in mind, we can understand the second lesson I've learned about abiding joy: To discover joy, we must abandon the search for it, and go looking instead for the One who is Himself joy to see, to know, and to love.

God is always with us. But our view of Him is often limited or obstructed, either by the difficult circumstances of our lives or by the wayward attitudes of our hearts. So if we want the joy God has promised, we must always be looking for God's presence, whatever the situation in which we may find ourselves. We may have ample cause for sorrow; but no matter how difficult a situation might be, if we can somehow see the goodness of God at work, we will know Him better, love Him more, and find joy in His nearness.

I remember coming home one afternoon to discover that the kitchen I had worked so hard to clean only a few hours before was now a terrible wreck. My young daughter had obviously been busy "cooking," and the ingredients were scattered, along with dirty bowls and utensils, across the counters and floor. I was not happy with the situation.

Then, as I looked a little more closely at the mess, I spied a tiny note on the table, clumsily written and smeared with chocolatey fingerprints. The message was short—"I'm makin sumthin 4 you, Dad"—and it was signed, "Your Angel."

In the midst of that disarray, and despite my irritation, joy suddenly sprang up in my heart, sweet and pure. My attention had been redirected from the problem to the little girl I loved. As I encountered her in that brief note, I delighted in her. With her simple goodness in focus, I could take pleasure in seeing her hand at work in a situation that seemed otherwise disastrous.

The same is true of my joy in the Lord. Many times life looks rather messy; I can't find much to be happy about in my circumstances. Nevertheless, if I look hard enough, I can usually see the Lord behind it all, or at least working through it all, "makin sumthin" for me. He has left His signature, His fingerprints, on the

situation if I will just search for them. And when I find the evidence of His presence and His plan, a joy rises up in me that cannot be overcome by otherwise unpleasant circumstances.

Several years ago, I severed my left Achilles tendon while playing volleyball. My left leg up to my hip was placed in a cumbersome cast for many weeks. As far as I was concerned, the handicap couldn't have come at a worse time: It was a hot Georgia summer, and we were living in a tiny campus apartment with only one bathroom—upstairs. My whole leg throbbled and itched continually; I couldn't get up and down stairs without terrible difficulty; I couldn't drive or take a shower; and I had to sleep on a mattress in the hall because my fumbling in bed with the cumbersome cast kept my wife awake at night. To make matters worse, my wife was pregnant and struggling almost daily with morning sickness.

My frustration was complete. Where was God in all this?

The Lord was there, but I had to look for Him. I found Him in all the wonderful friends who came to take care of us. They helped with meals, housecleaning, and transportation. They prayed for me and with me. They kept me laughing and reminded me that God was still in control. And when the cast finally came off, I realized that we were closer than we'd ever been before. God had been in the middle of that mess, and He had left His signature in the lovingkindness of my friends.

## JOY IN THE EVERYDAY

Sometimes joy seems to elude us most in the everyday routine. The world seems gray; the hours seem empty. We aren't particularly distressed, but we don't find much pleasure in what we do. In these times, joy must come to us the same way it comes when we are hurting: We must catch a glimpse of the Lord. The task of preparing ourselves for joy in the ordinary circumstances of life is actually a matter of directing our attention. As Bible teacher A.W. Tozer once put it, we must build "the inward habit of beholding God." How do we cultivate this habit?

Perhaps surprisingly, we make room in our lives for God's joy through the traditional disciplines of the Christian life—such

things as prayer, worship, Scripture study, fellowship, and service. Now you may object that, as the Scripture tells us, “all discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful” (Heb. 12:11, NASB). Yet eventually joy will follow the discipline—if we keep our eyes on the Lord as we labor. The purpose of spiritual disciplines, after all, is to open us to God’s grace, which also opens us to the joy of encountering God. Each discipline can open our eyes to some aspect of God’s goodness that enables us to see, know, love, and delight in Him more deeply.

The discipline of prayer, for example, can give us daily a joyful view of God’s nearness. But it becomes a frantic and draining labor if it centers on ourselves or our concerns. Once while I was in graduate school, our finances were especially tight, and I panicked when an emergency expense came up. When I approached the Lord in prayer, I found myself pointing furiously at the problem and nagging Him to pay attention to it.

Then suddenly I remembered to turn my focus to God instead of the problem. I began to praise Him, declaring Him all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving. I began recalling all the times He had proven Himself faithful to us, all the times we had seen His fingerprints in the midst of untidy circumstances. Before long I was rejoicing that He ruled over the situation. I still wasn’t happy with my circumstances, but the assurance of God’s loving power brought joy into the midst of an everyday challenge.

## A LOVE LETTER FROM GOD

Scripture reading is another discipline that can provide us a joy-inspiring view of God. When I approach the Word of God as a fresh love letter from my closest Friend, searching for Him as I read, then in each line I taste the pleasure of knowing better the One I love. When the Scripture commands me, for example, to forgive, the command becomes an occasion for joy when I behold in the Scripture my Savior forgiving my own sin, setting the example for me. Then, when I ask Him to help me forgive others and express my confidence that He will answer, I sense His nearness even more vividly. My joy abounds.

The same is true when we reach out to others in the discipline of service. If we keep our eyes on the task itself, we may find ourselves in a joyless ministry. The work may be long and hard, the fruit may be difficult to measure, the people receiving our ministry may be ungrateful.

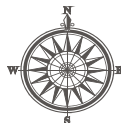
Yet Jesus said that if we care for the “least” of His brothers and sisters, we will be caring for Him as well (Mt. 25:40). We’ll find joy in our service only to the extent that we find Jesus there—only when we remember that whatever work we do, we are “working for the Lord” (Col. 3:23).

## LOOKING FOR GOD’S FINGERPRINTS

Whichever Christian discipline we may consider—worship, witness, fasting, fellowship, or many others—the same principle holds. If we want our lives to flow with joy, then we have to look for the Lord in what we’re doing. However dismal or intimidating our circumstances may seem, we must look for God’s fingerprints in the midst of them, some indication that He is with us. Only then will we be able to “leap for joy,” as Jesus said, because we’ll be looking past the hardship to focus on our great reward: the Lord Himself (Lk. 6:23).

Will we always be happy? By no means. Happiness will come and go until we reach heaven and at last our desire rests fully in God.

Will we be beyond the reach of sorrow? Of course not. But the sorrow will be chastened by the joy, and the joy will be our refreshing stream in the desert until that Day when the wilderness will become a garden—and we will behold at last the beauty of the Face which we were created to enjoy forever.



# PARENTING ON PURPOSE

DO YOU PLAN YOUR PARENTING AS  
CAREFULLY AS YOU PLAN YOUR  
VACATION?

by Robert Brandt

My three sons and I slumped heavily in our chairs, eyes focused on the fading campfire. We had spent a great day playing ball, chopping wood, hiking, and cooking outdoors. Now we “men” capped off the day by discussing growing-up matters—our faith in God, honesty, and hard work, with a little sex education thrown in. I’d invested a lot of energy arranging this weekend and had reluctantly left sick patients in the hands of other doctors. As I curled up in my sleeping bag, I thanked God for a great day of fathering my guys, trying to equip them for the world.

After breakfast the next morning, I snatched an hour for personal devotions and introspection while Rog, Rod, and Randy took off to a nearby creek. Despite my warning, they reappeared at our cramped camping trailer covered with mud from head to toe. To put it mildly, I lost my patience. After a superb first day, I blew it!

After I apologized to them, my guys drooped outside again and I knelt in our tiny trailer, praying earnestly about my poor parenting skills. The issue was far greater than just overreacting to mud. I wondered, What does it take to be a consistent, good father? The Bible? Of course. Intuition? Probably. Maybe I just need to work at it harder . . .

Then the lush woods silently whispered an answer as I saw God’s patterns and systems at work in nature. Obviously, there was a master plan! So why didn’t I plan my parenting as carefully as I planned everything else in my life?

Although we plan the purchase of our cars, homes, investments, and even our vacations, too often we allow our kids to sprout like the neighborhood weeds—without nurture, pruning, or cultivation. By default, our parenting is often reactive and unpredictable.

So how do we plan to parent? Certainly the most carefully laid plans can go awry, and the best parents can have children who rebel. But there are biblical principles that can keep our feet on solid ground when everything around us keeps shifting. Here are five principles God began teaching me that day in the woods. They have been a source of growth and strength not only for my children, but for me and my wife.

## PRINCIPLE #1: SET YOUR PRENATAL STRATEGY.

Luke 14:28–32 teaches us to plan ahead by counting the cost before building a tower or preparing to fight a war. I can see a similarity in anticipating the birth of a child!

Amidst all the nursery plans and name selections, we sometimes forget to think about our own job descriptions. However, the prenatal months are a great time to consider such things as what emotional “baggage” you may bring with you to parenthood. Think about your parents’ parenting techniques. What worked? What didn’t? What do you want to make sure you do and do not do?

Before our first son was born, we sat in our Volkswagen overlooking a California beach, dreaming about how perfect our parenting would be. We critiqued our parents’ style with ruthless honesty. For instance, my parents struggled to establish regular family devotions. I knew Ruth Ann and I could do much “better,” and we gradually brushed a portrait of the ideal parent mentoring the perfect child.

Go ahead. Paint your picture. And read the books, too. Dream all you want; just don’t share the details with any experienced

parents. If you're like me, you hate it when people snicker at you. But go for it anyway! It will help you build a foundation for realistic parenting. The fine-tuning will come later.

## PRINCIPLE #2: PARENT YOUR CHILDREN'S ENVIRONMENT.

Proverbs 22:3 says, "A prudent man sees danger [evil influences] and takes refuge."

Safe refuge includes our homes. TV remote controls, telephones (with pornographic 900 numbers), and car keys are controllable. But there are other aspects to consider, such as peer influence.

When our children were growing up, we lived on a farm and they had few "walk-in" playmates. While school was out, we knew who our children were spending time with, since they depended on us for transportation.

It's healthy for kids to have pals from different backgrounds, but there are times when your child may be attracted to someone whose influence could be harmful. A considerate way to monitor your child's environment is to share your concerns with him but warmly welcome his friends into your home. That way, you can keep an eye on things at the same time you are developing your child's discernment.

## PRINCIPLE #3: DEVELOP A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR EACH CHILD.

Proverbs 22:6 promises, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." "The way he should go" suggests that we're expected to plan that way.

My wife and I regularly took short breaks to discuss our observations and plans for each of our four children. While some of those plans pertained to the whole family—family devotions every school-day morning and daily chores for each youngster—other items were child-specific. The result was a list of words or phrases on three-by-five cards to remind me of behaviors I needed to talk to

my children about and when and how to talk with them. The cards reminded me what to pray for my kids and helped me check on their progress. Here are some real examples, ranging from the crucial to the trivial. Some of the notations were for me to initiate; some were for my child.

*Name of Child* \_\_\_\_\_

*Pray for progress in spiritual maturity; note benchmarks.*

*Ask what specific friends he is praying for.*

*Pray for God's wisdom in college choice and major.*

*Pray for future mate.*

*Remind not to drop "g's" from "ing" words.*

*Encourage to keep room neat—surprise visits.*

*Don't butt into conversations.*

*Stop picking on . . .*

*Smother in love!!*

I keep my three-by-five cards in my wallet for easy access and to make notes. They give me instant recall when I pray for my kids. If three-by-five cards don't work, you can just as easily use a daytimer, pocket computer, or your memory!

#### PRINCIPLE #4: PLAN DATE NIGHTS WITH DAD.

Proverbs 27:23–24 urges us to give careful attention to the condition of our flocks and herds. How much more do we need to pay attention to our children!

One hurried morning my daughter Rosalyn said something harsh to one of her brothers. Maybe he deserved it, but I fired off, "Rosalyn!"

"Sorry!" she shot back insincerely and then was out the door. No time for a discussion. In the garage, before starting the car, I pulled out her card and scribbled, "Sorry comes too quickly. Sincere? Monday night?"

Unless I absolutely can't escape the hospital because of some critical care patient or a surgery, I've made it a practice to have a Monday night date with one of my kids. On Rosalyn's next turn, before I left the office, I took a look at the notes I'd made on her card during the past month.

That Monday evening we covered the gamut of her life. She shared about boys, exams, the courses she enjoyed most, the careers she was considering, and how her gifts seemed to fit them. All the while, I was looking for a smooth opening to slip in the importance of sincerity when we apologize. The chance came, we talked about it, and she took another step toward maturity.

It was also on a Monday night that I realized I never learn anything while I'm talking, and it is critical to really listen to my kids. More than once I've arrived at my Monday night rendezvous with an agenda, only to discover as we talked that there were much more important things to discuss.

Date nights are a fantastic way to get a close-up look at your child's world and to show that you're vitally interested in what matters most to him or her.

## PRINCIPLE #5: MATURE TOGETHER.

Deuteronomy 4:9 reminds us: "Do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them."

One Monday night I met Randy at a favorite restaurant and was greeted with, "Decisions, decisions. So many decisions while I'm still so young and inexperienced."

He was trying to choose courses for his senior year in high school. "Dad, what do you think?" With an impish grin he confessed, "I've never been a senior before; it's all new to me."

"And I've never been a father of you when you were a senior before, son," I responded. "We're both learning as we go along."

The future looks especially unsure to teenagers. Yet this is when they must make some of life's most crucial decisions. Our role as parents

is to give advice based on biblical principles and our experiences so that we can help them make the best decisions possible.

For me, one of the greatest thrills of my life has been to watch my children make well considered, mature choices. I love to sit across the table, challenge them to set goals, and help devise a plan of action to reach those goals. Although the point of this interaction is to help them become independent, it isn't always easy for a parent to give up control!

For years I wanted to spend a family vacation in the enticing snow-capped Rocky Mountains. Finally we set the date. Everyone was excited—everyone but Rosalyn. She loved family trips, so I wondered why she wasn't enthusiastic about this one.


When the day came to leave, we boarded the plane without my only daughter. She had chosen instead to join a mission trip to South America.

As our plane headed for Colorado, I wrestled with Rosalyn's decision, a "first" in our family. But I remembered the day I'd knelt in our cramped travel trailer begging God to show me how to be a better father. Then I realized that loving our children enough to be willing to give them up to God's will was just as important a principle as all the others God had taught me over the years.

By the time the wheels thumped onto the runway in Denver, my disappointment in not having Rosalyn with us had turned into pride over her grown-up decision.

## PARENTING—OUR FINEST HOUR

I am convinced that we Christians should carefully plan how to influence our children with biblical values. After all, God Himself is the greatest of all planners. He planned for our salvation with His heartwrenching decision to sacrifice His only Son. He revealed His plan through prophets many centuries in advance. And now He's in Heaven preparing a place for us.

Can we do any less than pour our time, energy, and love into parenting the children He has given us? 

# WHERE'S MY PARTY?

## THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL'S BROTHER

Mark Buchanan

I wish some stories had better endings: funnier or punchier or more poignant. Endings that looped back, clean and deft, to gather up all the loose threads and lace them into a perfect bow. Endings that helped you sleep more soundly at night.

I wish this for the story we call The Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Jesus tells it sparingly, vividly. And what a spellbinding tale it is. All the great themes distill here: rebellion, homecoming, redemption. And love: preeminently love.

### THE PERFECT TALE

Just think: A son swaggers away demanding, "Give me." His pockets are well lined, but things go horribly awry. He loses all. He tumbles down into emptiness, sordidness, aloneness. He is half-crazed with hunger.

Then he comes to his senses.

He realizes that all he ever wanted he once had. Could he have it again, even a little of it? He limps home, pleading, “Take me.”

The father has been waiting and watching a long time. The minute he sees his son, he hitches up his robe and runs to greet him, to welcome and embrace him. He calls for his son to be dressed in sensible shoes and fine clothes: “Put a ring on his finger! And a feast! We need a feast with musicians, dancing—the whole shebang.”

And that’s where I want to leave it. Picture the final shot: a conga line snaking through the happy crowd, bongos pounding, roast dripping on the spit, revelers hoisting glasses to toast the reunion. The camera would pan wide, the scene would fade to pastel softness, and those felicitous words would be emblazoned over the wide screen: “And they all lived happily ever after.”

Lovely.

Except it doesn’t happen that way.

## THE REST OF THE STORY

I think we typically misread this parable. We call it, and have for a long time, *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. It’s that rascal’s opera. It’s that scallywag’s debut. It’s a story to remind us, should we or anyone we love ever end up in a pigpen, that in the father’s house there’s food to spare—and more: an extravaganza of welcome. You can go home again.

I have a proposal. If I can’t have my ending (and no one, it seems, is offering), I think we should rename this parable. The story is mostly not about the younger boy. It’s mostly not about the great celebration that awaits his homecoming. The prodigal’s story is only half the parable. End there, and you cut the engines midflight. There’s a meanwhile to this story. There’s another boy approaching. The father, remember, had two sons.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

“Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”—Lk. 15:25-28

The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

This parable is about the son in the field who comes near enough to disapprove but no closer. It’s about the dutiful son who has grown bitter and very, very old in his duty. It’s about the son who refuses homecoming in all its forms. This son is introduced into the story with an ominous word: *Meanwhile*.

I want to call the story, if just for a day or two, *The Parable of the Meanwhile Son*. Technically, *meanwhile* denotes an in-between time, events in the midst of something else. But in our language, *mean* also connotes cruelty, spite, malice, stinginess. It’s a perfect word for this story.

*Meanwhile.*

You can almost hear the music shift into a lower, minor key. You can see the shadows gathering. The sense of presentiment thickens.

“YOU THERE, IN THE PHARISEE OUTFIT...”

But let’s back up. Jesus told this story—He told three, in fact—because He picked up a surly attitude among some religious guys.

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”  
—Lk. 15:1-2

So Jesus tells three stories about the lost and the found. A shepherd loses a sheep and goes over hill and dale to find it. A housewife loses a coin and ransacks house and pantry in search of it. A man—a man with two sons—loses one. At least one. The man waits.

It’s a trick. Jesus is leading these Pharisees and lawyers

along. He has set the bait in the first two stories with a “suppose you had... and you lost...” refrain. Suppose you had something you treasured. Something close to your heart, something whose absence would pierce and rend you. Suppose it went missing. Wouldn’t you do anything, everything, to get it back?

Jesus is inviting these men into a profound empathy with God: Can your heart break over the things God loses? Can you taste His grief? Can you party with the best of them?

Jesus knows that these men, most of them anyhow, will refuse His invitation. He calls them to leap into the heart of God, but that requires warrior daring, childlike meekness. It calls for hitching up your tunic and, like David stripped down and dancing, racing headlong over a dusty road to welcome home a scoundrel. These men are too prudent for that. They’re too dignified.

So in the third story, Jesus changes tack. He drops the refrain, for one. No one is invited to suppose anything, to imagine themselves inside the skin of the heart-sick and the grief-stricken, the one who has lost and is frantically searching. Instead, Jesus holds up a portrait of the sick-hearted and the grievance-ridden, the one who feels raw with self-pity and is bristling with rancor.

Or maybe it’s not a portrait. Maybe it’s a mirror. Jesus holds it up and says, in effect, “Look at this older boy. Recognize him? You couldn’t see yourself in the shepherd or the housewife, desperate in their loss, but do you catch any resemblance here? And does it bother you? Is this where you thought you’d arrive when you first began?”

I wish this story was for someone else.

“WHO, ME?”

It turns out to be a story for me. A story about me. This is a story for obedient sons and good daughters. It’s for church-going folk. It’s for those who do their duty, in season and out. It’s for those who sit on missions committees and elder boards, who help out in youth ministries and children’s ministries and worship ministries, who are ushers and greeters and pastors, who—yes!—tithe.

But there's a meanwhile.

Meanwhile, something happens in us. Or, maybe, something fails to happen. We do all these good things—and more—but sometimes we resent doing them or feel pride in doing them. We feel overworked and undervalued. We feel that we're the ones hewing all the wood, hauling all the water, teaching all the Sunday school classes, paying all the bills (and probably we are), so why does the reward go to the prodigals? "Look," we say with the meanwhile son, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even 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 fattened calf for him! —Lk. 15:29-30

This is a story for sons working hard in the field, toiling all the meanwhile. As the story began—before the meanwhile—it delivered a deep shock when the younger boy looked his father in the eyes (or maybe he doesn't, maybe he looks away, looks at his feet, stares at a beetle inching across the packed earth) and said, "Give me." He wanted his inheritance. In effect, he was asking his father to drop dead. This detail has long been noted, often been remarked upon.

But the story delivers a shock deeper than this. It's what the older brother says to his father. We can easily imagine him looking the father hard in the eyes, his own ablaze with indignation. "You never gave me even a young goat," he hisses. "You never gave me anything."

This has been a long time coming. This attitude didn't arrive in a day. This is the fruit of meanwhile.

The older son has been stricken with a slow blindness, a creeping, inexorable glaucoma of the soul. We call it thanklessness. It magnifies scarcity, flaw, deprivation. It's an inability to see anything as gift, abundance, grace.

It's genetic. We inherited the condition from our forefathers in the garden. God gave them everything except one tree, one kind

of fruit, one kind of experience. But they didn't celebrate the abundance: They grew bitter over the lack. They saw not the windfall of what was bestowed, but the barrenness of what was withheld.

In time, if the condition remains untreated, it makes us into older sons, complete with his chronic resentment: They—the prodigals—they always get what they don't deserve. Me—the good boy—I'm always deprived of what I've worked so hard for. And You—You never gave me anything.

Meanwhile the father stands and waits. Again. And He pleads.

Not scolds. Not threatens. Pleads.

So his father went out and pleaded with him.... “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” —Lk. 15:28, 31

How many straying sons can he bear? How many flesh-and-blood losses can he carry? A patient man, this, with the patience of a man whose heart has been scoured and harrowed by wild joy and wild sorrow. How long will he plead in the face of defiance and insult?

How long will he stand there in the gathering gloom, while the air thickens with smoke and gnats and darkness, and hold out this invitation to come to the light and the music and the dancing?

“You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.”

“ENTER INTO THE FATHER'S ABUNDANCE.”

I saw a man yesterday holding his newborn son. The child was wrapped in blankets, and the man held him close but loose. You can't hold a child too tightly; it hurts him. But you can't hold him too cavalierly, either, or he'll fall. It's an art, holding a child, finding just that crook of the arms, that openness of the hands, that curve of the shoulders that will protect but not smother, embrace but not stifle.

The man's face was radiant with love, but there was a


shadow there too. What father doesn't worry, even just a little? He holds his son, and as much as he might harbor a thousand dreams for him, dreams of grandeur and valor, he knows he is called to one thing in the end: to let this child go. He knows a day will come when his child will need to stand on his own, to choose which path he'll take and then walk it. He knows they both must live their lives getting ready for that moment, mutually strengthening for it.

This is the hardest thing: The father could give and give—"You are always with me, and everything I have is yours"—and still the son might miss it.

How will the son see the father? It depends not so much on what actually happens but on what the son, in the meanwhile, chooses to remember.

He may remember that he had food to spare in his father's house.

Or he may remember that his father never gave him anything.

And if it's the latter, can any amount of pleading change that? 

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## THE "GO" OF RECONCILIATION

*If you...remember that your brother has something against you.  
Matthew 5 :23*

Have an attitude in your mind and soul toward the person who has something against you that makes reconciliation as natural as breathing.

# THE LAST LETTER

SOMETIMES A “FULL AND WONDERFUL  
LIFE” ENDS ABRUPTLY

by Ed Stetzer

She was 22 years old, had just given birth, and was in prison for her faith. Perpetua was a Christian of the 3rd century. Her judges and father begged her to recant for the sake of her child. She refused. Instead she used her final days to write the story of why she chose to die. Upon hearing their verdict, she wrote, “we were condemned to the beasts, and we returned to prison in high spirits.” Later, Perpetua sang triumphantly as she marched into the Roman amphitheater to face execution.

1700 years later, in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer sat in prison awaiting his execution. One of the few Christians to resist the Nazis, he took a bold stand for the Gospel. Bonhoeffer was arrested after a failed attempt on Hitler’s life. During his last days, he wrote reflections on the end of life. They were mixed with courage and fear as he confessed his loneliness but proudly concluding, “Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!”

Soon after, Bonhoeffer’s “full and wonderful life” ended at the end of a noose. A doctor who was present at his death later wrote, “In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God.”

These stories confront us with the penetrating question: Have I made a difference worth recording? The power of these stories—these last letters—is they lay us bare before the call of the Gospel. The light of these men and women who burned for Christ exposes our lives as dying embers in comparison.

John Piper once noted that in our prosperous culture, Christians are able to “give to the church and then devote themselves financially to building the good life and all the while keep a clear conscience.” He’s right.

For example, giving to the poor is thoroughly divorced from any real sacrifice. New technologies allow us to make giving possible, even when born of greed. I can sign up for programs in which a portion of my purchase goes to help the poor in Third World slums. Nice. We have created a 21st century form of indulgences in which we buy for ourselves—both goods and a clear conscience.

We need to recapture the sacrificial hearts of the Perpetua and Bonhoeffer. Living in a quasi-spiritual generation, there seems no need to embrace their courage. Yet as Christians, we step into a history paved by men and women who willingly died for causes greater than themselves—from fighting injustice to radical evangelism. Jesus was the first, but His followers, in countless numbers, have counted their lives as nothing for the sake of His glory.

How can we continue this legacy? Those stories undoubtedly stir our hearts, but only for a fleeting moment at best. We read, we applaud, we commit, and then we move on. Again. How do we break free of this complacency and step into the story begun for us 2,000 years ago on the cross? It can begin by writing your own story.

It has been the tradition of soldiers and missionaries to leave their families a “Last Letter,” only to be read in the event of their death. These letters not only contained emotional goodbyes, but were also personal statements about why they chose risk over safety. Why the cause was worth dying for.

These Last Letters are harrowingly honest. There’s no room

for clichés or braggarts when you’re staring death in the face. You either intend to die for the cause, or you wouldn’t be writing the letter.

These are letters of testimony. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul writes that our very lives are letters also, written by the Spirit of the Living God. In the spiritual sense, our lives are a kind of “last letter,” the only testimony we will ever have to bear about how and why we live for the Gospel.

If our life letters were assembled, what would be our contribution? Are we taking up our cross and going into the slums of Bangladesh, the brothels of Thailand and the HIV plagued orphanages of South Africa? Are we carrying on the legacy of Robert J. Thomas, who died on the shores of Korea, beaten to death as he tossed Bibles into the hands of his murderers? For all the Christians who quote Jim Eliot’s famous words about “giving what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose,” what exactly are we giving?

Karen Watson was a member of this generation who understood her call. She was a young missionary recently murdered in Iraq. At her funeral, her “last letter” was read:

*Dear Pastor,*

*You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death. When God calls there are no regrets. I tried to share my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn’t called to a place; I was called to Him. To obey was my objective, to suffer was expected, His glory my reward, His glory my reward...*

*The missionary heart: Cares more than some think is wise. Risks more than some think is safe. Dreams more than some think is practical. Expects more than some think is possible.*


*I was called not to comfort or to success but to obedience... There is no Joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving Him. I love you and my church family.*

*In His care,  
Salaam, Karen*

In response to letters—and lives—like these, I wrote my last letter, and in comparison to these, it seemed so... insignificant. I was not near death or about to go on a dangerous journey. But then I realized that we never know when history or death may visit us. We should live as if every day matters. Because it does.

In the writing of it, something happened. More than ever before, I desired to leave a better and lasting legacy, to be a better disciple and to live more for God's glory and agenda. I want to be the person described in my letter.

As a generation, what will our letter say? Will we be defined by action, sacrifice, and justice, or complacency, caution and social apathy? Triumph or spiritual setback? Lip service or life service?

When the question is, "What would I be willing to die for?" the answer cannot be anything but revolutionary. So I ask you to consider it. How will your Last Letter read? Write to impact someone later but be a living epistle for the Gospel now. And if your time ends abruptly, let them say you had a "full and wonderful life." 

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## REWARDS FOR THE RIGHTEOUS

*by Charles Spurgeon*

*Light is shed upon the righteous and joy on the upright in heart.*

*Psalm 97:11*

Righteousness is often costly to the person who keeps to it at all hazards, but in the end it will cover its own expenses and return an infinite profit. Living a holy life is like sowing seed. For a time it appears lost and gone. We are mistaken if we look for an immediate harvest. In fact, when sown, it lies latent. It is only invisible, however, not extinct. One day it will manifest itself as both light and gladness.

# WHEN FAIRY TALES LIE

by Betsy St. Amant

As little girls, we all dreamed of our future husbands. We pictured ourselves in a Cinderella or Snow White costume, waiting patiently for Prince Charming to come galloping up on a white stallion. There didn't even have to be a reason for him to "rescue" us. In our dreams, it was enough for him just to find us.

Young boys didn't usually dream about being Prince Charming, but most entertained thoughts and acted out fantasies of being the "hero". They wielded swords made of cardboard and wore capes that had worried mothers insisting the piece of cloth didn't really give them the ability to fly. These male/female instincts are God-given and natural. But left in an unrealistic, fairytale world perspective, they can cause many dangers to a marriage.

## PRINCE OR TOAD?

Too often as married couples, we blame our spouses for not being what we dreamed of all those years ago. At some point, even subconsciously, we will realize that the man who blanched at our latest cooking attempt and "forgot" to help fold the laundry isn't Prince Charming after all. There is no white horse to admire, just muddy paw prints left on the carpet from the dog. There is no handcrafted sword for protection, just the rifles on the gun rack, waiting for hunting

season. There is no fancy costume, just the same clearance rack items from last season.

The reality check is shocking as we realize things will go wrong in life. The plumbing will go haywire, the in-laws will stir up drama, and your job will stress you out. These situations, and others, are guarantees in our lives. Patience runs short and money runs out. This is marriage! This is what you signed up for when you claimed your vows before God and witnesses.

Couples today believe their lives should be a fairytale, and are thoroughly disappointed when they realize they are wrong. When the surprise wears off, they have a simple choice: stay or leave. Some choose to take the easy way out. They say, “Maybe Prince Charming is waiting for me at the ball” and bail out of their marriage. They think, “Perhaps there is a Princess who actually needs me down at the local bar” and abandon their families. But they are in for an even ruder awakening.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FENCE

It’s not that the grass isn’t always greener on the other side -- it’s NEVER greener. I’ve learned from watching those close to me that the problems you leave in your first marriage will follow you to your next. Why is this? Because you’re still the same person. You don’t get to leave your baggage in the form of a suitcase at your old house. It’s delivered priority to your next relationship and usually becomes heavier along the way. We look up in surprise in the middle of our new choice and think, “hmm, this wasn’t what I had in mind, either.”

This type of discontent comes from the heart. A human soul not in fellowship with God will never be happy. One might be able to fool themselves temporarily, pretending that they’re satisfied with their new boyfriend, new wife, even their new car or house. But without a living, breathing, soul-deep relationship with God, they will never find true joy and contentment.

## THE CURE

It is painful to watch those close to you make bad choices -- decisions that you instinctively know will come back to haunt them.

We can't change what others do, but we can make positive examples of our own lives and marriages. How? By not leaving. By staying when times get tough. By arguing and having fights but not walking out of the house. By being real and honest and not worrying about the public mask of "yes-we're-doing-great-thanks."

If you and your spouse are having problems, get help. Forget what others might think and take care of your marriage. A healthy relationship with your mate is more important than your reputation in the church or at work. Don't let pride keep you from getting counseling or talking with an older, wiser couple. Learn from your mistakes and those of others and try not to repeat them. But most importantly, spend time developing your own walk with Christ. Without God in your life and in the center of your relationships, you have zero chances of a healthy, happy marriage.

So next time your Prince Charming "ribbits," kiss him anyway. Know that the way you see your spouse is up to you. Put on the rose colored Princess glasses, realizing that no one is perfect, but that it sure makes things easier if we overlook a few faults. You might not always feel like a Princess, and your life might be far from a fairytale, but a thriving relationship with God, our true King, will make our lives, and marriage, much sweeter than any happily ever after you could find in a book. ❀

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## EVERYDAY MISSIONARY

*If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.*

*John 13:14*

If we do not steadily minister in everyday opportunities we will do nothing when the crisis comes.

# TO SET THE CAPTIVES FREE

by Paul Thigpen

THE DEBTOR'S prison—for many centuries in most societies it was a grim and familiar institution in the lives of the poor. The concept was simple: If you couldn't pay your bills, you went to jail until you could.

But there was a problem with the arrangement. While confined to prison, you couldn't earn money to repay your creditors. So many debtors remained locked away all their lives, and their families often starved.

Happily, debtor's prisons are no longer a legal reality in Western culture. Yet the principle of imprisonment for indebtedness is still present with us as a spiritual reality. The New Testament insists that if someone sins against us, that person has incurred a debt and is bound up spiritually in his relationship with us.

This legal/spiritual parallel is drawn in several gospel passages, but perhaps most clearly in Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:21–35). In that story, our sins against one another are explicitly compared with the financial debts that one servant of a king owes another. The spiritual consequences of such indebtedness are characterized as a prison, and the gravity of the situation is portrayed in disturbing, even terrifying, terms.

## THE WAY OUT

We can be relieved, then, to know that God has provided a way out of the dilemma of a spiritual debtor's prison. It's called forgiveness. Two of the New Testament words translated "to forgive"—*aphiemi* and *apoluo*—vividly reflect this spiritual dynamic. *Aphiemi* means "to remit, to lay aside," and was also a financial term for cancelling debts. *Apoluo* means "to release, to set at liberty," and was also a legal term for letting a prisoner go free.

These word pictures have a clear implication: When someone offends us, we can absolve him of both the spiritual debt and the prison sentence by forgiving the offense. In fact, that was precisely the point of Jesus' parable, which He told in response to Peter's question about how many times he must forgive an offending brother.

With that truth in mind, we must make a crucial observation: Since the key to the debtor's prison is in our hands, we have not only the power to free him, but also the obligation. For as Jesus pointed out in the parable of the unmerciful servant, God has forgiven us, and expects us to do the same to others. When the wicked servant refused to forgive his own debtor, his master had him thrown in debtor's prison until he should repay his own debt. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart," Jesus said (Mt. 18:35).

But we are obligated not only for our own sake, but also for the debtor's sake. For just as it was with the debtors of long ago, the prisoner's ability to turn from the past is hindered as long as he languishes behind bars. In an important sense, our failure to forgive can deny the offender the freedom he needs to change.

I am reminded of a father whose teenage daughter once lied to him (for the first time) about where she went on a date. The father caught her in the lie, and for months afterward he refused to forgive her for that breach of trust. He wanted to punish her in an emotional prison.

The result? His continuing resentment so changed his attitude toward her that he began expecting her to lie about her activities, and so he frequently accused her of covering up. Not surprisingly, her

behavior changed to match his expectations, because she reasoned, “If he’s convinced I’m lying anyway, why should I bother to tell the truth?” Thus the daughter became a habitual liar. It was only much later—when he was willing to forgive her and risk trusting her again—that she was freed to turn from her wrong behavior.

## ESCAPE FROM THE TORTURERS

We shouldn’t be surprised, then, that Jesus made forgiveness such a priority, even insisting that reconciliation with one another must be a precondition for approaching God (Mt. 5:23–24). This spiritual necessity is perhaps most obvious in marriage. That, I think, is why Peter exhorts husbands to live considerately with their wives “so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Pet. 3:7).

My wife and I have found it to be a stubborn truth that when one of us is offended by the other, we can’t pray together—or even go to sleep at night, for that matter. It’s not that we haven’t tried. We once had an argument and rather than talk out a grievance, because we thought we were too tired to handle it reasonably, we tried to sleep.

But the “torturers” mentioned in Jesus’ parable plagued us so mercilessly that we finally had to be reconciled if we were to find any peace that night. In that light, we’ve come to see that “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Eph. 4:26)—though a hard saying—is actually a merciful command.

This bondage in which we hold our debtors when we fail to forgive them is uncomfortably obvious when they live with us. But the principle is still at work even in less intense relationships. Though geographic distance or infrequency of contact may dull our awareness of the imprisonment, those “torturers” are at work just the same, eating away at our spiritual vitality. Our approach to the “altar” of God’s presence is thus impeded by their attacks, and we discover why Jesus told us to be reconciled first.

## SPIRITUAL HANDCUFFS

Once we realize that both the debtor and the “creditor” are adversely affected by resentment in this way, we begin to see a further

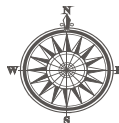
and more sobering reality about forgiveness: Our failure to be merciful not only hinders our approach to God; it also locks us up in the cell next door to our debtor. “Forgive [apoluo], and you will be forgiven” (Lk. 6:37) could just as well be translated, “Release and you will be released.”

“We often repeat rather mechanically the phrase, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.” But we should remember that when Jesus taught that prayer, He added a disturbing commentary: “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Mt. 6:12, Mt. 6:14, Mt 6:15). The chains on the one who has offended us are in reality handcuffs—one end on his wrist, and the other on our own.

This truth was vividly presented to me some years ago when I was struggling as a new Christian to build a healthy relationship with my father. Like most teenagers, with parents who are bound to be imperfect, I had a number of resentments toward my father for things he had done, and things he had failed to do. As I sought to repair some flawed aspects of my own life, I came up against a terrible realization: Much of my own brokenness was rooted in my alienation from Dad.

Thus I began the process of our reconciliation. Of course, it was the first of “seventy times seven” occasions when one or the other of us had to forgive; I had taken only the initial step on a painful road to a righteous father/son relationship. Nevertheless, the prison doors had been unlocked, and they never again stayed shut for very long. Dad and I both were now free to become new men, and within a year, he too was walking with the Lord.

I know now that the Kingdom of God has no room for creditors who refuse to forgive. None of us can afford to owe or to be owed any spiritual debts. If instead we remember that in God’s eyes, we’re all bankrupt—and yet set free from debt—we too can learn that love “keeps no record of wrongs” (1 Cor. 13:5), and that we have the liberty to love because He first loved us.



# THE PRACTICE OF SECLUSION

by Whitney Hopler

*“And He said to them, ‘Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.’” -- Mark 6:31*

One day years ago while I was listening to a book on tape in my car, the cassette’s thin tape caught on a tiny wheel inside the machine and began playing the same few sentences over and over again as it looped around. Try as I might, I couldn’t eject the tape from the player. Neither could I turn the player off, no matter how many times I pushed the “on/off” button. I was trapped inside a car filled with incessant chatter, and I had at least one more hour of driving to go before I reached my destination.

My pulse increased and my concentration decreased as I began to panic, trying in vain to override the tape by switching the player over to the “radio” setting. Finally, in desperation, I turned the volume down to its lowest level. Yet I couldn’t escape the tape’s muffled droning in the background while I drove. A wave of relief washed over me when, at last, I reached a parking lot and was able to shut off the tape by turning off the car.

Do the tapes that play in your life cause you stress sometimes? Maybe it’s the buzz of technology that clamors for your attention every waking moment – your cell phone, e-mail, fax machine, and pager. Perhaps it’s the static of people who place constant demands on you – young children, difficult co-workers, ailing parents, or a friend in a crisis. Do you wish you could turn off your schedule, only to find that it keeps you looping around in a frenzy of activity?

If so, God invites you to come away with Him to secluded place. There, in the embrace of solitude and silence, you can turn off the world's voices and tune into the voice of the One who made you. You'll never hear all He's whispering in your ears until you meet Him in seclusion.

No one who has ever walked the Earth had more important work to do than Jesus. He was confronted with crowds, demands, noise, and interruptions nearly everywhere He went, and He could easily have been constantly busy. Yet He made seclusion a priority: "In the early morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went away to a secluded place, and was praying there," (Mark 1:35, NASB). After He had spent time away in quiet, Jesus returned to His work renewed.

God will recharge your batteries, too, if you make seclusion a daily habit. Here's how you can do so:

**GIVE YOURSELF PERMISSION TO ENJOY A DAILY TIME OF SECLUSION.** Realize that seclusion is a vital habit to have in order to gain the perspective, clarity, and peace God wants for you. Recognize that God designed life's natural rhythms to include times of aloneness as well as relationships, and times of silence as well as sound. Don't feel guilty about making time for seclusion. Don't worry that a habit of seclusion will impair your relationships or make it harder for you to get things done. Trust that, in your time of seclusion, God will strengthen you to deal more effectively with every person and situation in your life.

**CHOOSE A SPECIFIC TIME AND PLACE FOR SECLUSION.** Realize that if you don't schedule a daily appointment for seclusion, the shouts of urgent tasks will overpower the whispers of important ones. Choose a time of day that works best for you; such as after you first wake up in the morning, during your midday lunch break, or in the evening before going to bed. Plan to spend a set amount of time – even if only a few minutes – in solitude and silence. Go to a regular place for your solitude: a corner of your bedroom with a cozy chair, your backyard, a break room, or even your car. Whenever you can manage a longer time of seclusion (such as on a weekend or during

a vacation), schedule it and go to a special place (such as a park or retreat center) for it.

**BREAK AWAY FROM DISTRACTIONS.** Don't compromise your seclusion by carrying your cell phone with you, answering the doorbell if it rings, or sneaking a peek at your "to-do" list or a newspaper. Make a conscious effort to break away from all distractions. Ask God to help you break free of your daily pressures and quiet your spirit.

**BRING VITAL SUPPLIES.** Take a copy of the Bible, a notebook, and a pen with you. Have a particular Scripture passage in mind to read and meditate on during your time of seclusion. As you pray about it and other topics, ask God to speak to you, and write down the insights you receive.

**BE HONEST.** If people ask where you're going when you break away for seclusion, don't be ashamed to tell them the truth. Simply say you need some time to think and pray about things. They will likely respect your decision.

**BE PATIENT.** Expect it to take at least a few moments for echoes of the world's pressures and noise to stop reverberating in your mind. Relax and sit still. Listen to the silence around you. Anticipate hearing God's voice speaking to you when the time is right.

**DO IT WHEN YOU NEED IT.** Whenever you're facing a particularly stressful situation and feel the need for some time in seclusion, make time for it however you can. Just excuse yourself and pull away so you can return in greater strength later. Make use of the downtime stuffed into the pockets of your day by turning it into extra seclusion time. For example, while you're sitting in a line of minivans waiting to pick your kids up from school, turn off the radio and sit alone in silence to clear your mind, then pray.

**RE-ENGAGE WITH ENTHUSIASM.** After withdrawing for your times of seclusion, be enthusiastic as you re-engage with people and activities. Celebrate your newfound peace, strength, and clarity. Thank God for the gifts He has given you during the times you've accepted His invitation to "come away" with Him. 