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new identity

God in focus. World in scope.

ISSUE 30

VOLUME 8 NUMBER 2

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New Identity Magazine (ISSN 1946-5939, Vol. 8, No. 2) is published quarterly by New Identity Magazine, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, P.O. Box 1002, Mt. Shasta, CA 96067, United States.

MISSION STATEMENT

New Identity Magazine's mission is to provide diverse, Biblecentered content to help lead new believers and seekers to a fuller understanding of the Christian faith.

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Grow

Education of different Christian perspectives, building foundation, understanding Christian concepts, jargon, practical application of Scripture and more.

Connect

Encouragement through testimonies, articles about relationships, fellowship, church, community, discussions and expressions of faith

Live

Participating in the world as a Christian, with stories of people actively pursuing God through their passions, organizations and resources. How to apply ones gifts, talents and desires to serve God and others, sharing the love of Christ in everyday arenas.

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"After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

1 Peter 5:10 ESV

Every winter you could say that the earth suffers. In most places winter storms bring freezing temperatures that stunt growth, heavy rains batter the ground and feet of snow hide the sunlight from the land.

We will have trials and tribulations in our lives says Jesus in John 16:33, and like the earth, we too can suffer a beating, but that doesn't mean this sinful world has won. Rather, every spring God restores the dead and dormant landscape to new life. As I write this, bright yellow daffodils have boldly sprung up outside my office window. How they contrast with the dull colors of the winter scenery awakens my heart to hope, God's goodness, the coming of spring, and the celebration of Easter. As 1 Peter 5:10 says above, we will suffer for a short time here on earth, but as believers we will be restored to life that lasts forever (John 10:28) - an eternal spring if you will.

Especially around Easter, spring is a time to reflect even more deeply on Jesus and how his resurrection has made it possible for us and all of creation to be fully and forever restored in due time. Creation declares God's glory (Psalm 19) and it's no accident that God chose the spring season for the celebration of Easter. If we look, listen and reflect, the symbolism and parallels we can gather go deep and wide.

Like you and I, our writers also suffer through difficult questions, tough decisions and trying situations. As they share their lives and insights with us in this issue, I encourage you to seek Jesus even more this season and let him speak to you through the Scripture shared and encouragements spoken. Try out Christian meditation with Hannah Helms. Learn how God reconciles relationships with Brandon Hurlbert.

Discover ways to recognize what God wants or doesn't want for us through discernment with Gary VanDeWalker. Dig into commonly misunderstood scriptures and gain new insight with Greg Whyte.

God speaks in may ways and through many people. May you be inspired to see Jesus everywhere and in everything.

Cailin



REPAIRING BROKEN BRIDGES

MOVING FROM FORGIVENESS TO RECONCILIATION

By BRANDON HURLBERT

y college roommate just got engaged, and I was genuinely excited for him. This is quite a normal response for such a situation, but it has been a crazy two year journey to this point. His fiancé is also my ex-girlfriend. To complicate things further, they started dating right after my friends and I had gotten an apartment together. Making matters worse, they didn't even talk to me about it. However, almost a year and a half later, everything is all good. When I step back and analyze this very strange situation, I can clearly see the hand of God repairing broken hearts and relationships, bringing conviction for sin, and empowering his people to follow his example by forgiving and reconciling.

My aim is to show through my personal story, as well as the grand narrative of Scripture, that God is a God who forgives us, reconciles us, and dwells with us, empowering us to do the same.

In the beginning, God created all things. Prior to creation, there was only God and yet there was also a community. I know this sounds confusing, (and it is!), but as God is Trinity (tri-unity), he is the one God that exists eternally as three distinct, yet perfectly unified, persons. In coequal majesty,

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honor, and power, God exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This Godhead loves to love. In perfect unison, each person of the Trinity loves the others in loving service (1 John 4:8). It is this diverse yet unified loving community that expresses who God is.

God created all things, not because he needed anything to fulfill him from outside, but because there was such a surplus of love within him. Creation is an overflow of God's personal love, and we, his humans, were created to participate in the loving relationships that take place between Father, Son, and Spirit when God made us in his image (Genesis 1:26).

This doesn't mean we physically look like God, but like a painting reflects the emotions, creativity, and thoughts of the artist, we "image" our Creator. Our emotions, our desires—particularly to love one another and be in harmonious community with each other—is a result of our being made in God's image. Thus, in the story of Scripture, our first parents (Adam & Eve) were made to be in relationship with each other, and also with their Creator. In the garden, they found themselves within the loving embrace of the triune God. That's why when we are

reconciled to God as believers in Christ, the Holy Spirit indwells us, and invites us to indwell him.

It was in the Garden of Eden, where the first humans Adam and Eve, broke their special unified relationship with our creator God. The trickle-down effect of their choice to sin has affected us all. Graciously, it was in that same garden which God also began his forgiveness story to bring us back into relationship with him.

Yet, we need more than forgiveness to repair a relationship, we need reconciliation. God offers us both. The words "forgiveness" and "reconciliation" are very similar, but there is a fundamental difference. Forgiveness is often seen primarily in a legal sense. If one was to break the law in some way or another, they would be expected to pay a fine, serve jail time, or make reparations somehow. Sometimes, the offended party may choose not to press charges, in some sense, this is what is usually meant by "forgiven." However, even though the guilty are declared innocent, they are still seen through the lens of their wrong action. The thing that has changed is simply that the offended party won't do something negative against the guilty. On the other hand, reconciliation is when the offended



party does something positive for the guilty. It is not just about maintaining the status quo, or rebalancing the scales, although it is not less than that. No, reconciliation is about restoring the broken relationship and advancing it to an even greater level. While forgiveness usually focuses on a static law, reconciliation focuses on dynamic relationships that bend and twist and break, but are made right along the way and ultimately in the end. Put simply, Forgiveness is not holding a grudge against someone; Reconciliation is actually being their friend. However, this is getting ahead of the story. Adam and Eve are broken in the garden, in need of reconciliation. Tangible redemption is found wanting in their banishment from the garden, but they are promised that redemption is coming (Genesis 3:15) Here in the garden, we are introduced to our own need of reconciliation, and we ourselves are offered a faint glimmer of hope on the horizon of Scripture's story.

My relationship with my ex-girlfriend was short but intense. I won't relate to you the whole story, but in essence, here is what happened: We dated, we broke up. I hurt her. I felt hurt by her. I lost a lot of friends. That whole season was really awkward, and it really sucked. Things started to get better; it

Through Jesus' sacrifice, God wiped CLEAN the debt RECORD that stood against us, in other words, he FORGAVE us.

felt like we were beginning to be reconciled, then she started dating my roommate. More suckyness; more awkwardness. It felt like everything started over. There was lots of miscommunication, awkward situations, avoidance, and fear. I hope in some way you can sense the level of pain and hurt caused by sin. I also hope you can recognize the massive need for not just forgiveness, but for reconciliation.

Seeing his precious creation in trouble, alienated from him by their choice, God acted. He did not sit idly by, but he entered into history and acted. One can see him act in the Old Testament by calling a people to himself (Genesis 12), saving that people from slavery, instructing them about himself and

how they are to live, bringing them to their own land, and even providing them a ruler (Exodus—2 Samuel). Even when his people were forgetting his instruction, God sent prophets to instruct them even further. However, his people continued to not listen. God would do something dramatic to ensure his people's reconciliation to himself.

"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Hebrews 1:1-3 ESV).

This explains that God spoke in the past through various mediums, and now he speaks definitively through Jesus, who is the exact imprint of the Father. Elsewhere in Scripture it speaks of Jesus as the one who is at the Father's side revealing him (John 1:18), the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), and the one who is to be exalted above every name (Philippians 2:9-11). Yet, these scriptures also explain that this Jesus did not come to us as a stunning figure, wrapped in glowing white robes with an ethereal halo encircling him. Instead, he was born to a lowly woman in Bethlehem and placed in a dirty feeding trough. It was God that became flesh, a particularly nasty word for some in the first century (John 1:14). He took the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of humankind in humility (Philippians 2:7-8). It is Jesus that is able to sympathize with our weakness (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus is both 100% divine and 100% human. Although that may be tough to wrap our heads around, Scripture explains why this is a good and necessary thing: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body

As new creations, those who have been FORGIVEN by and reconciled to Jesus, we now have the TASK of being reconciled to each other.

of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him" (Colossians 1:19-22 ESV). Here we see that because Jesus is the perfect representative of both God and Man, he alone is able to reconcile God to Man and Man to God. It was through his death, burial, and resurrection, that Jesus reconciled creation to Creator. Through Jesus' sacrifice, God wiped

clean the debt record that stood against us, in other words, he forgave us. Through Jesus' sacrifice, God also restored the broken relationship by destroying the evil that had caused the brokenness. In other words, in Jesus, God was also reconciling us to himself according to his promise in the garden.

The story now continues with us. "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:17-19 NASB). As new creations, those who have been forgiven by and reconciled to Jesus, we now have the task of being reconciled to each other. As Christians, we are not just called to forgive others in our hearts but keep them at an arm's length away. No, we are called to be of one heart and one mind (Acts 4:32) with our brothers and sisters—we are called to be reconciled.

By God's grace, today I have pretty awesome relationships with both my roommate and my ex-girl-

friend. It took a lot of being humbled by God. We had to have some very difficult conversations, but it was through these conversations that the Holy Spirit began to reconcile us. Sure, it is a little weird sometimes, but that is part of the journey.

If you think hard enough, I am sure you can think of a relationship that has been broken for some time now. Perhaps it was their fault, maybe your fault, or even a little of both. Regardless, have you forgiven them? Are you reconciled? If not, here are a few observations that might help you on that journey to a restored relationship.

1. Actually forgive them

So often we harbor bitterness towards people. This is because we are still mad at them and haven't really forgiven them. Pray that the Holy Spirit would allow you to actually forgive them in your heart, and not just by way of your mouth.

2. Talk to them

It is so easy to just believe that everything is alright because you have forgiven them. Talking to them and opening up that line of communication is essential to reconciliation. Talking with both my roommate and my ex-girlfriend cleared up a lot of miscommunication and false assumptions I had. It may be tough, depending on the type of hurt you have experienced, but the Holy Spirit will give you strength.

3. Reconciliation is a Journey

While forgiveness is static, reconciliation is dynamic. It takes time, sometimes a whole lifetime. My journey to reconciliation began almost two and half years ago, and I am still on it. What is important to note is that reconciliation is not something you have to force. You are not necessarily going to be best friends with the person who betrayed you, so you don't have to pretend to. Your relationships might also look different after reconciliation.

4. Reconciliation will be fully accomplished when Jesus returns

There are some situations where reconciliation is just not feasible, for instance, relationships in which one member has passed away. More extreme situations, such as when rape, abuse, or even

murder has occurred, may be impossible to reconcile in this lifetime.

It may not be wise for a person who has been severely abused to confront their abuser alone. It may take a third party; perhaps a professional counselor or a pastor. And remember, depending upon the depths of the wounds, it may take many years for healing to come. Nevertheless, when Jesus comes again, he will make all things new. There is no relationship too broken or damaged to be fixed by our God.



Brandon Hurlbert

Brandon has a B.A. in Biblical and Theological Studies from Biola University. He also has a minor in English Literature which means he enjoys reading the classics when he has the time. His passion and his heart is for the Church, with specific focus on integrating academic thought with church life. He also really, really likes coffee. He currently lives in southern California. Brandon can be reached at brandon.m.hurlbert@mail.com.

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THE PITFALLS OF TAKING WHAT YOU LIKE FROM THE BIBLE AND LEAVING THE REST

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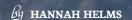




IN PURSUIT OF INTIMACY

Part 2

CULTIVATING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THROUGH MEDITATION



sit in the chapel, cross-legged on the floor. Through the closed door I hear the dull thud of doors slamming shut, the hum of students conversing, and the buzz and bustle of a regular Tuesday evening. I fidget and move around so that I'm kneeling, and then prostrate myself on the floor. I breathe in and out, close my eyes, and hold still. I want to keep the busyness of the day at bay; the never ending to-do list threatens to invade the quiet space that I've created. I try to focus my thoughts: Am I just supposed to be thinking about God? Maybe I should just focus on trying to feel peaceful. Or is it that I'm supposed to be thinking about something about God's character? What was that thing I was supposed to do for my hall director? When was the last time the carpet was cleaned? Crap, I'm not even thinking about God. OK. Now I'm hungry.

My first experience with the Christian discipline of meditation took place eight years ago. During my junior year of college I enrolled in a class entitled Responding to God. It was a crash course in prayer, reading the Bible, and practicing disciplines aimed at fostering a relationship with the Lord. Each week we were given a new task or exercise to put into practice. This particular week we had been

When it comes to LISTENING to God, I'm much better at thinking about all the things I could be DOING rather than listening to him.

instructed to find a quiet place - somewhere we wouldn't be interrupted - so that we could simply sit and think about God. In addition to thinking about God we were supposed to listen to him. The entire week was a struggle.

I may be a natural born listener when it comes to my interpersonal relationships with friends and family, but when it comes to listening to God, I'm

My UNDERSTANDING of meditation as a spiritual practice has been SKEWED by the way it's defined by the culture around me.

much better at thinking about all the things I could be doing rather than listening to him.

Aside from that week years ago, I have never incorporated meditation into my spiritual life. Like many people, I have associated the term with eastern religions, yoga classes, and modern psychology's adoption of mindfulness. I've seen it used as a tool to combat anxiety and cope with trauma, but have given it little thought as a way to connect with God.

Perhaps that is part of the problem - my understanding of meditation as a spiritual practice has been skewed by the way it's defined by the culture around me. In fact, the contemporary understanding of meditation is completely different than Christian meditation. In his book *Celebration of Dis-*

cipline, Richard J. Foster writes that in the contemporary cultural context, meditation is seen as an effort to empty oneself of thoughts and distractions. The effort is placed on letting go and freeing the mind. In contrast, the practice of Christian meditation is not a matter of becoming empty but a matter of making room for God to come and fill us up.

Additionally, Christian meditation is an ancient spiritual practice that exists independently of its eastern counterpart. There are numerous references to meditation throughout the Bible, and according to Foster, the two Hebrew words used to mean meditation appear a total of 58 times. Meditation appears with great frequency in the Psalms, where the author writes, "I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty deeds," in Psalm 77:12 and "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my

eyes on your ways," in Psalm 119:15. More references to meditation can be found in Psalms 19, 38, 49, 63, 104, 143, and 145.

The type of meditation referred to in the biblical text is still relevant for Christians today. Foster puts it eloquently when he says, "What happens in meditation is that we create the emotional and spiritual space which allows Christ to construct an inner sanctuary in the heart." It is not about becoming detached, but fostering and building the most important attachment of all, our attachment to God.

That's it. It's pretty simple. There's not a special formula, and you don't need to have achieved any sort of expertise or prowess in biblical knowledge or your prayer life to practice meditation. All you need is the willingness to schedule a specific time to practice meditation. Although that may sound simple, I found my own initial experience with meditation to be quite challenging. It was difficult to sit and allow myself to be present with God without being consumed by distracting thoughts.

This is why meditation is the first discipline that we are exploring as part of our spiritual practice series. As we look into the various ways that



Christians can deepen their relationship with God, meditation is the fitting place to start - learning to direct our thoughts toward God and to listen to him is something that those in search of God and seasoned Christians can both practice. Other spiritual disciplines build upon the foundation that is developed through meditation. As Dallas Willard states in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, "Spiritual growth and vitality stem from what we actually do with our lives, from the habits we form, and from the character that results."

It's hard at the beginning to feel that meditating is actually productive. And the only way to get good at meditating is to do it habitually. That's what I am trying to do now rather than to give up when I get discouraged, get hungry, or start thinking through my never ending to do list. I'm going to practice this and make it a habit. I invite you to practice along with me.

Prompts for Meditation

Try using some of these prompts to begin your meditation practice. Before you begin, find a place where you will be free from distractions. Set down your phone or turn it off. Find a place that will

allow you to focus and actively engage... I do not recommend trying to meditate in bed before you fall asleep, because more often than not you will fall asleep (this is based on personal experience.)

Scripture - Read a verse or small passage. As you sit quietly, dwell on it and the weight of its words.

Centering - A you sit to meditate, place your hands palms down as a symbol that you wish to give your concerns or worries to God. Inwardly, pray, "God, I give you my worry about work. I give you my anger at my mother. I give you..." After a few moments, turn your palms up as a symbol of your desire to receive from God. You may pray inwardly, "God, I receive your peace, your patience, your joy."



Hannah Helms

Hannah Helms grew up in the rural mountain town of Mt. Shasta, California. After she left to pursue her education at the University of Portland, she spent several years enjoying the rain and microbreweries of the Pacific Northwest. Now a hospice social worker in her hometown, she lives with her husband and their growing family. She has written for The Junia Project, and occasionally blogs at hannahjanehelms.wordpress.com.



TASTE And SEE

THE ART OF DISCERNMENT

By GARY VANDEWALKER

magine a group of dwarves huddled together in a stable. They are cold, hungry and scared. Their greatest fear is to be "taken in" by the notion that a lion exists who is the great king of their country. In an instance, the lion appears in their midst. With a shake of his mane, a feast appears before the dwarves. Each dwarf now holds a goblet of wine in his right hand. The troupe begins to gorge themselves on the food, but something is wrong. Even though the lion has provided the richest of foods, they only perceive the food to be what one could find in a stable. One calls his food hay, another an old turnip, yet another a raw cabbage leaf. They compare the wine to dirty water from a livestock trough. They refuse to acknowledge the lion, or the quality of food before them. They lack discernment. This picture is painted by C.S. Lewis in his final Narnia book, The Last Battle.

The Bible speaks often of discernment. Paul writes, "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (Philippians 1:9 ESV). In Hebrews 5:14, "But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." There is an expectation our love will be combined with dis-

And it is my prayer that your love may ABOUND more and more, with knowledge and all DISCERNMENT.

Philippians 1:9 ESV

cernment. And unlike the dwarves of Lewis' story, we would be mature enough to distinguish good from evil in the spiritual food we partake. Discernment is required in our walk with Christ. Yet do we know what discernment is?

The psalmist says, "Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments" (Psalm 119:66 ESV). The phrase "good judgment is often translated "discernment." The word means "taste." It means to have the ability to distinguish between flavors. In a spiritual and moral sense it means to know the difference between shades of good and evil. We must learn to be ethical chefs, with a taste for the spiritual food of God, and know what spoils the feast and destroys the flavor.

The human ability to taste is a fine skill. We can taste .04 ounce of salt mixed in 530 quarts of water. Scripture calls us to develop this same skill in how we handle the Word of God. Just as a chef develops his sense of taste, so we need to develop our own sense for God's Kingdom. Let's examine six ways to acquire the spiritual taste of discernment.

KNOW YOUR TASTES

A chef knows his tastes. He can identify salt, sour, sweet, as well as many other flavors. Adam and Eve ignored this step. God told them the basics, don't eat of the one tree in the Garden. This was the only command, the baseline for all their actions. Carrying out God's desires and having a relationship with him was based on developing a taste for one thing.

Satan steps in and challenges their knowledge. He tells the couple what tastes sweet is really sour. He allures them with a recipe which is enhanced if they would only see eating of the tree will make them like God. The tree is called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Had they stuck with God's command and made him their acquired taste, they would have gained a deeper discernment. Their minds would have tasted the deception and rejected Satan's suggestion.

However, the universe has changed because of their choice. They introduced a new ingredient, sin. I once worked in a bakery where as the pie fillings were being made, salt was mistaken for sugar. We can't go backwards. Sin is the same. Once the choice transpired, the couple had altered creation. Creation, including humans, would now die. Their mental processes no longer worked with godly discernment. Their relationship between one another was altered. The children they bore would kill one another and pass on a skewed longing for the world over God.

Discernment means learning what are the basics of Christianity. This comes from studying the Scriptures and gaining a foundation to build on. God helps us understand what is good and evil, the foundation of good discernment.

TASTE SENSITIVITY

We need to improve our taste sensitivity. As Christians that know we are tainted by sin, we need to train our mind to know the basics of taste once again and the rightness of the things of God. As we regain the foundation, there is a need to explore each flavor and to know its intricacies. While the first step is building a foundation of facts and engaging our minds, the second step involves relationship.

Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees. These men knew the foundation, but they could not understand how Jesus' words were to be interpreted. In John 7:17 Jesus says, "If your will were to do the will of my Father, you would understand my teaching." Jesus speaks of relationship. They are challenged to have such a close relationship to the Father that their will is completely aligned with his. This type of relationship does not come through head knowledge alone, but through loving with all one's heart, mind, and soul (Matt. 22:37). A truth such as grace is understood best by first knowing grace as a truth, but then embracing it in our relationship with God. The taste of grace is known, but through relationship, the sensitivity to the flavor of grace results in knowing the ingredient so well, we can know of its absence and when it should be added into life. So we learn the taste of God's favor towards us, without works. His love for us given without merit. Our taste grows more sensitive as we encounter situations with others where grace is a needed flavor. Our relationship with God becomes a measure of good and evil. What adds and deepens our relationship is good. What tears down this relationship and distances us from God is evil.

SHARPEN TASTE

We sharpen our taste by learning from others. Proverbs 27:17 says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." Great chefs learn from great chefs. No one starts a great cooking career by ignoring what others have developed. The Old Testament Law came through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ. The church is built upon the prophets and the apostles. In the 2000 years since the giving of the New Testament, many amazing people of God have built upon the biblical foundation.

Our beliefs should be based upon Scripture and aligned with the great people of faith before us; or to stick with the metaphor, think of it like a recipe. There is a long history of spiritual connoisseurs before us. Know how these people looked at truth. We familiarize ourselves with the teachings of the Church. Keep working from the Scriptures, and compare their teachings to the basics. Apply human reason where it lines up with the Scripture. We should pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help us understand how the recipe works.



George Whitefield, a great preacher of the 18th century, began his understanding of Christianity by grabbing onto holiness. He was determined to be the most holy person the world had known. However, he soon discovered he had erred. As he read the Apostle Paul, he came to see holiness as something only God can give, not something he could obtain on his own. He read the works of the early church (theologians, like Augustine) and discovered he had the wrong recipe in his relationship with God. He spoke with his friends, John and Charles Wesley, who also had to change the recipe. These three men changed the world for Christ. Not by their innovative ways, but by relying on the foundation of Scripture, using and practicing discernment, while applying truth to their lives.

LEARN HOW GOOD THINGS TASTE

Learn how good things taste. We settle for McDonald's when there is a gourmet meal to be had. The Scriptures tell us what tastes to seek out: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23 NIV). What is

the result of our decisions or view of the world? Does it produce the tastes of God's Kingdom or something different? Discernment is bringing the flavors of these fruits into our circumstances and into the world.

WORK FROM THE BASICS TO THE MORE COMPLEX

Work from the basics to the more complex. Hebrews 5:12-14 ESV says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." We are growing in our faith. If we need to know the basics of Scripture, begin there. If our lives need a better foundation of godly morality, figure out how it tastes. As we practice discernment in small decisions through our day, we prepare ourselves for the more complicated tasks ahead.

God doesn't present us with only one right choice in EVERYTHING we do. Our job is to DISCERN the flavors of good and evil in our lives and CHOOSE the good.

We may wake up in the morning and ask, "What shirt does God want us to wear?" Discernment begins as we understand Augustine's advice to "love God and then do what you will." As we choose between a blue and red shirt, we realize our loving God is unaffected by either choice. We are free to choose as we will. God doesn't present us with only one right choice in everything we do. Our job is to discern the flavors of good and evil in our lives and choose the good. If we like nuts, we can add them to our chocolate chip cookies or not. Not every choice contains elements of good and evil. But there are choices before us each day that need God's truth. As our palate is changed and we go from milk to more solid food, the complexities of a Kingdom life will become more clear. We gain the skill to tackle more complex decision making, matching our level of discernment.

NEVER STOP LEARNING

Never stop learning. Proverbs 1:5 ESV says, "Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance." Until Jesus returns and brings us to perfection, there is a need to always learn what truth is and how to recognize it. We hold to the truth of God or the lie of the enemy. The world is complex and the lines between right and wrong become blurred. By asking the Holy Spirit for wisdom and knowing the Word of God well, discernment can be applied; our tasting skills can be made sharper.

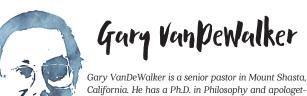
There are obstacles to good discernment. Our culture promotes its own values, which make dividing truth from error more difficult. Tolerance is a cultural value promoted at every opportunity. Jesus

told us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 12:31). There is a difference in flavor between loving people and accepting sin. It is easy for us to confuse the two, while loving people. Our own pleasures or lack of knowledge may be hindrances to discernment. As we taste the things of the world we must work hard to not be gullible. We need to ask God to: "Teach me good judgment and knowledge" (Psalm 119:66 ESV). This means breaking down what is presented to us in life, and learning the ingredients of what is being offered. "But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22, NASB). We do this by knowing the Word of God and holding it up to what we have been given. As John writes, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1 NASB).

Even amidst these obstacles, in 2 Timothy 2:15 NASB, Paul give us encouragement, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth." Paul desires for us to be great tasters of truth. This takes work. Sometimes we will fail. This is why Paul tells us to be diligent.

We learn from our mistakes, take up God's Word, pursue it, and learn to master it. Along the way we stumble, but these are the first steps in learning to taste correctly.

There is a lot to learn in discernment and good taste. These skills can be reduced to a single question we should regularly ask ourselves: "In the light of God's truth, what is the wisest decision I can make?" This may come through our knowledge of the Scripture or asking God for guidance in prayer: James 1:5 ESV, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him." When we pursue God's wisdom we will "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8 NLT).



California. He has a Ph.D. in Philosophy and apologetics. He and his wife Monica run the Narnia Study Center, along with their three boys. He can be found reading, searching for new books, or watching Star Trek when no one is looking. He has a passion for all things C.S. Lewis.



A great obstacle to testing our ability to discern by taste is our online life, along with our connection to social media. First, we are challenged in terms of time. What seems moments on our computers can turn to hours. Prayer, spending time in Scripture, relating to our families, investing in good works can be lost in the mire of blending Facebook posts, Instagram searches, tweets, and the endless wormhole of online activity. Even the luxury of sleep and having energy can be robbed when a steady diet of internet usage consumes our lives. While the Internet is a great tool, it can also be like binging on French fries, and finding ourselves too full to include in our diet what is healthy.

Also, social media often reveals our hearts. Jesus said what comes out of the mouth, proceeds from the heart (Matthew 15:18). This may be extended to our interaction with social media. What is produced from our fingers to the screen, reveals the workings of our hearts and what is influencing our tastes. Vulgar responses, lack of love in how we comment to others, and our choices of what we share online comes from our true ability of what we prefer to taste. As our priorities of time must be measured against God's priorities for us, what we produce and leave on social media sites should reflect a hunger for the Kingdom of God.

The company we choose online also reflects our tastes. There is a dark side to the net, which feeds the fleshy part of our appetites. It is filled with perverse images, which corrupt the imagination, and create unrealistic expectations that we inevitably bring to our relationships. Moreover, on social media sites, seemingly innocent conversations can quickly turn into sensual flirtations. Our taste needs to be honed to recognize these dangers and flee from them. We tend to believe we are in control, but we ignore the warnings of discernment at great risk.

There is also a host of opinions on every subject to be found online. These opinions must all be tested and tasted with careful concern; even the spiritual wisdom we find must be held against the Scriptures. 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 ESV says, "Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good." Do not treat spiritual wisdom with triviality. Put it to the test of Scripture. "Hold fast to that what is good." —Gary VanDeWalker



PURPOSE PURPOSE PIPAIN

HOW ONE PARAMEDIC SHARES GOD'S LOVE WITH HURTING PEOPLE

By BETHANY WAGNER

B ustling farmers markets, crowded local eateries, cozy coffee shops, and beautiful panoramas make up the quintessential Portland experience for many living in and visiting the city. But working twelve-hour nightshifts as a paramedic in Portland, Holly Kay sees a very different side of the city—and of humanity—than most people. And there, in some of the darkest moments of pain, brokenness, and even death, she shares God's love as a skilled healthcare worker and dedicated follower of Christ.

How did you first come to know Christ?

I grew up with a solid theological understanding but no real relationship with Christ. Throughout my preteen years, I had a sense of emptiness and insecurity as a result. I was just going through the motions; all of my friends and family went to church and believed the same things, yet I never truly took them to heart.

Around this time, my older sister committed to read her Bible every day. Even on our family backpacking trips, she lugged her massive study Bible along wherever she went. I started following her example for the wrong reasons—I was really impressed with her, and I wanted people to be impressed with me too.

But as I plodded my way through God's story, I came face-to-face with Jesus. One day I found myself sitting in my closet, the only quiet place in the house, reading Isaiah 49. Verses 15—16 read, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." Those words struck me—my name is engraved on his hands! Christ did not just come for the entire world, but for each one of us. From that moment, my faith took a totally different turn, as I finally understood what it meant to have that personal relationship with Christ.

How has your faith grown and changed since then?

After that, I entered a difficult season in my life that tested my newfound faith. God said, "I'm going to be with you and show you that my faithfulness can stand the test of this trial." My faith grew so much in that time of loss as I realized that he is trustworthy, no matter what you're going through

and no matter what trials you may face.

What led you to the paramedic profession?

That season of trial was really the springboard for my journey into paramedicine. I feel strongly that we should not waste our pain. The best expression of praise is a life that reflects the grace and mercy that God has shown to us! He walked with me through profound loss, and I wanted to extend that same grace to those who are experiencing incredible pain or the loss of a loved one.

2 Corinthians 1:3 offers praise to God, who comforts us in our troubles, so that we can minister to others "with the comfort we ourselves receive from God." When you're going through suffering you receive comfort from the Lord, and then you can turn around and pass that comfort onto other people who are walking through hard times.

Pain has reason and purpose! God gives you grace and mercy for your trial, but he's also giving grace and mercy to everyone your life touches, because you can extend his love to many people. I'm excited every time I have the opportunity to do this as a paramedic.

"Pain has reason and purpose! God gives you grace and mercy for your trial, but he's also giving grace and mercy to everyone your life touches, because you can extend his love to many people."

"It's much easier to be distant and put up professional boundaries, but I think there's a lot to be said for allowing your heart to break."

What are some ways you go about showing that love?

In our world, facing emotions can be intimidating, and there are very hard, raw emotions that you witness and experience as a paramedic while you stand by patients during their most vulnerable moments or prepare to tell people that their loved one has died. I always try to make eye contact, acknowledge my patients as people, recognize and alleviate their fears, and support the people they love. It's much easier to be distant and put up professional boundaries, but I think there's a lot to be said for allowing your heart to break. It's difficult, but Jesus wouldn't hide from those moments. Our Savior wasn't afraid to feel pain.

The most impactful moments to me as a paramedic are not the dramatic calls when you bring someone back from the brink of death. Rather, I love the

little chances to love people the way Jesus loves them. Cradling an infant in a dark nursery at 3 a.m., reassuring a new mom that her baby is acting normal. A late night call for an elderly patient who just wants help climbing into bed. A meaningful conversation with a suicidal teenager. These are the moments that make me feel beyond privileged to be in this profession.

What challenges have you faced as a paramedic?

I'm naturally a follower who loves order, structure, and most of all, beauty. Yet God called me to a field that has nothing to do with those things and requires me to take charge. That was difficult to reconcile!

But in my work, I've found that our comfort zones are often limitations we put up ourselves. God

wants to stretch and push us into living for him in areas that we otherwise wouldn't choose. He said, "Holly, it's not a mistake that I gave you desires for structure, beauty, and peace, and also called you to this job. I have called you to chaos so that you can bring peace. And I've brought you to the ugliest situations so that you can bring beauty into them." It finally made sense! God made me to love those things so that I would feel the absence of them, and I would try to bring them into the ugliest of situations.

How have your experiences as a paramedic changed your understanding of God?

More than anything, I've learned that God doesn't waste his people. If he has me on a call, it's because he wants me on that call. You're his child, and he wants you wherever you are.

I remember the first time I had to tell parents that their child had died. I prayed, "God, give me the words. I need your presence here." He spoke in my heart, "My presence is here through you. I brought you here specifically for this moment so you can spread my grace and love in the midst of this tragedy." There is something so raw and unfiltered

and real about interacting with people in their most painful moments. Those tragedies used to overwhelm me, but I've learned to see so much of the Lord's sweetness and grace in those moments. Even in a world that seems overrun by tragedy, he constantly spreads so much grace.

Whether from the church pulpit, from the office cubicle, or from the barista counter, God calls his followers to minister to others in whatever field they find themselves. Holly finds her mission field in the streets of downtown Portland, in the homes of Portland residents, and in the back of her ambulance, ministering to people during some of their most dire moments of crisis.

Bethany Wagner

Bethany Wagner has a passion for listening to stories and telling them. A graduate of Azusa Pacific University in English and theology, she now works as a freelance writer and editor based in the Pacific Northwest. She loves reading old books, drinking exorbitant amounts of tea, and rediscovering the beauty and magic of the ordinary. She writes at thestoriedway.wordpress.com.



GOD'S PLANS FOR "ME"

RETHINKING JEREMIAH 29:11

By GREG WHYTE

know we all do it. Christian greeting cards and motivational writers and speakers sell their materials based on the pleasant-sounding statements made by certain Bible verses when taken out of their original context. And we all buy into it as we quote these verses to one another. But what is the danger in that? The danger of trying to make the Bible say what we want it to say is that sometimes, what we want it to say might totally contradict what the Bible is really teaching. Many a cult leader or charlatan has gained a following from misquoting Scripture to unsuspecting audiences. True, some popular verses might not be so dangerous, but their deeper meaning is still lost if we forget where that particular verse comes from.

Over the next several issues of *New Identity Magazine*, I will be looking at some of the most misquoted bible verses. I will look at them when taken out of context, looking at the potential dangers of only seeing the out-of-context verse. Then, we will do the work of asking what that verse may have meant to the person who wrote it in order to give us the fuller meaning of what that part of scripture actually meant in its own context. Finally, we will ask what it would mean if we were to apply that verse with the original meaning in mind.

Let's begin, shall we?

VERSE

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." — Jeremiah 29:11 NIV

OUT OF CONTEXT MEANING

God wants to bless me in my life, and he has plans to help me and bring me prosperity and satisfaction in my relationships, my health, my finances, and in my career. Everything bad that happens in my life is not part of God's plan, but I need to have enough faith in God to deliver me and bring me the promise of the hope and future of my dreams.

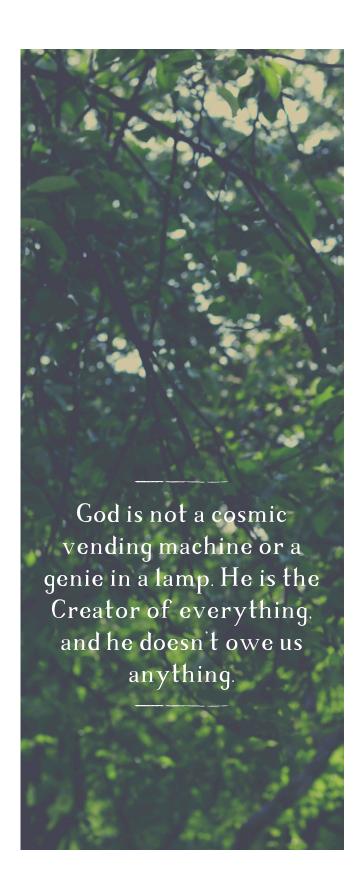
DANGERS OF READING OUT OF CONTEXT

While God does care for each of us individually (this theme can be found in other parts of the Bible), this verse probably isn't the best place to

look for proof of this. And while it may not be as dangerous to misinterpret this verse as some of the others we will be looking at, there are still some cautions that we need to consider, namely the self-centered tendency that we Westerners tend to bring to the text (especially us North Americans) and the problem presented when things don't go according to our plans.

First of all, let's be completely honest. You are not the center of the universe. Neither am I, and neither is the person sitting next to you. One of the problems of misreading this verse is that the focus seems to be on "my blessings" and what I can get out of faith — and it can potentially distort the nature of God's relationship with each of us. God is not a cosmic vending machine or a genie in a lamp. He is the Creator of everything, and he doesn't owe us anything.

But second to this, and I think this is probably the bigger problem, is when things don't work out the way we planned them. Was it God's fault? Was he unable to keep his promise to us to give us everything we desire, to prosper us and not bring us to harm and calamity? Then he would not be a god worthy of our worship. Or maybe the fault



lies with us. Maybe we didn't receive that healing or that promotion because we simply lacked the faith, or because we jinxed it because we didn't believe hard enough, or maybe we don't deserve it and maybe God doesn't really like us. Or maybe... maybe that verse doesn't mean what we *think* it means...

THE CONTEXT OF THE VERSE IN THE BIBLE

One of the first things that we should take notice of is the grammar that is used in this verse. Unlike English, which only has one word "you" that expresses both the single and plural pronoun (which might explain at least some of the confusion with this verse), many languages (including Hebrew, the language in which this verse was originally written) have separate words, and even separate grammar for whether you are speaking to a single person or to a group of people. In the case of this passage, the "you" listed here is plural, not singular, meaning that it was written to a group of people.

Second, if we look at the passage surrounding this verse, we see that this is actually part of a longer

prophetic letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent to a specific community (Jer. 29:4-28). Here is what it looks like in its original context:

4 This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. 7 Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." 8 Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. 9 They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

10 This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me

Jeremiah's letter was an ENCOURAGEMENT to know that God had not forgotten them and would RESTORE them if they would remain loyal, even in the midst of their tough situation.

with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile." — Jeremiah 29:4-14 NIV

To give some history, around 597 BCE, Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonian Empire and many of the people of Judah were carried off into captivity. A general feeling of despair came over the people. Many of them felt like either God had abandoned them, or God was powerless against the Babylonians. False prophets began declaring that God was soon going to deliver them from the Bab-

ylonians and enable them to return to Jerusalem. The letter that Jeremiah wrote was meant both to be a stinging rebuke against the rival prophets, as well as an encouragement to the people not to give up hope. Rather than enable them to return to Jerusalem, God's desire was for them to thrive in Babylon. After all, it was the God of Israel who had sent them into exile, not the gods of the Babylonians. (This was a strong statement to make. In those days, military successes or failures were thought to reflect the power or weakness of the respective nation's gods!) Jeremiah's letter was an encouragement to know that God had not forgotten them and would restore them if they would remain loyal, even in the midst of their tough situation.

HOW CAN WE APPLY THIS IN OUR OWN DAY

While the people of God are made up of many individual persons, the biggest application that I could see is talking to the church, especially where the church might be finding itself on the periphery of society, where it once enjoyed a central platform.

In previous decades and centuries, it could be argued by many that our values in Western cultures have been shaped by the Bible. The church was seen as a central part of our communities, and the big assumption was that everybody attended a church of one type or another at least somewhat regularly. Whether this assumption is accurate or not, this can no longer really be said in our own day. If anything, the Western world could best be described as "post-Christian", meaning that it no longer considers the church or the Bible as being a valid compass for our values as a society.

So, what would Jeremiah 29:11 have to say to the church in this context? Plenty. God has not abandoned his church, nor does he plan for evil to happen against his people (neither collectively,

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nor individually), but his will is to give us a hope and future. But there is also a part that we must play actively that comes with looking at the full context... We must acknowledge that we are no longer the center, and we must work to bring hope and healing to wherever we find ourselves, and we have to intentionally engage with the problems of the communities around us. For as we seek their blessing, God also blesses us.



Greg Whyte has a Master of Divinity from Tyndale Seminary in Toronto, Canada. He also has also spent time in Peru, South Korea and Ukraine and has an interest in the global church. Currently, he lives in central Canada with his wife and two small children. He can be reached at gswhyte@gmail.com



T en years is a long time to carry a heavy heart, but I did. And I know I am not alone. Each year, 19 million Americans and 121 million people, worldwide, struggle with some form of depression. For a few, it may be so constant they accept it as normal or part of their personality, and join the 80 percent who never seek specific treatment.

It took me a long time to find the courage to sort out my sadness through talk therapy. Even though I wholeheartedly believed in its benefit, somewhere along the way I'd been shamed by the message that counseling is for weak and faithless Christians. I know I am not alone in this skewed thinking. According to a 2013 LifeWay Research survey, nearly half of self-identifying, evangelical Christians in America believe prayer and Bible study alone are sufficient to overcome serious emotional or psychological trauma, depression, or mental illnesses like bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Some Christians may be hesitant to seek help outside church walls because they are unfamiliar with the mental health profession and its impact on their spiritual life. I sat down with Licensed Mental Health Counselor Molly Smith to address some of these common concerns. Smith works at The Front Porch counseling center in Mishawaka, Indiana.

Some Christians may be HESITANT to seek help outside church walls because they are UNFAMILIAR with the mental health profession and its impact on their spiritual life.

First, why should someone consider speaking to a counselor over talking to friends or family?

There's something really beneficial to getting an outside perspective. Proverbs 11:14 (NKJV) says "Where no counsel is, the people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety." There are many verses that speak of the benefit of having counselors. And if you go to a good counselor, you'll be heard and experience safety and compassion. Not everyone gets that from friends and family. There's also research that shows if you recall painful memories in the presence of a safe listener, the memories get stored in the brain differently—a little more healed.

What are some reasons people might be resistant to visiting a counselor?

As therapists, we often hear things like, "Dwelling in the past isn't healthy or beneficial" or the classic, "All you'll do is analyze me." Often, I think people associate seeing a counselor with having a mental illness, and that those who don't have a psychotic disorder or severe trauma don't need counseling.

"God DESIGNED us to be attached to people in HEALTHY ways"

To your point, I have heard people say "only crazy people need counseling." Can you tell me about other areas where counseling might be beneficial?

The most common reason people come to me is to talk about their relationships—with parents, spouses, children, grandchildren, etc. This makes sense because we're all in relationships. God designed us to be attached to people in healthy ways, but what did sin do when it entered the world? It disconnected our relationship with God, so of course we experience difficulty in our human relationships, too. Research shows a break in an important relationship can lead to dysfunctional relational patterns. Often, trauma or clinical depression are tied with fears of being abandoned or the loss of an

"I think God gives us insight into understanding the deeper parts of humanity in order to help heal us from harm and the many effects of sin."

important relationship. The beauty is, Jesus came to restore the relationship between him and us. And he's at work today in our human relationships, too. Entering into a therapeutic relationship with a mental health professional can help us gain skills and tools to have better, healthier relationships.

What would you say to someone who tells you their church/family believes the Bible is the only resource we need for dealing with our problems, and modern psychology theories are unbiblical?

One of my counseling professors used to say, "The Bible is sufficient, but not exhaustive." There are topics it doesn't specifically speak about. Of course, there are warped places in modern psychology.

But there are warped places in art, in business, in medicine, in government, too. I think God gives us insight into understanding the deeper parts of humanity in order to help heal us from harm and the many effects of sin. This also allows us to experience emotional and spiritual freedom. I think a lot of things in modern psychology (which I believe God has allowed humans to discover) can be used for his purposes, just like art, business, medicine, and government can, as well.

Another common concern I've heard in Christian circles is, "I think I need counseling, but I feel that means I am not a good enough Christian or my faith is weak."

There is no shame in having needs. I believe it takes a great deal of courage to ask for help. We're often afraid to admit the areas in our lives where we need to grow, because we don't know how others will respond to us. Especially if we've grown up with the idea that to need is to be weak. There are times when our faith is weak, but that doesn't mean we don't have faith. Having the vulnerability and humility to admit we need help is a beautiful thing, and Jesus is OK with our weakness. He came to heal the needy and the sick. He sat with those in need. And God will meet us in our places of need, too, opening a relationship with him in a new and deeper way.

Are you saying counseling could potentially enhance our spiritual lives?

I see many things discovered in modern medicine and psychology through the lens of Scripture. The more I learn about the body and mind, and how it is literally wired to connect with other beings, the more I understand how, as the Psalm says, we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:14). God wired us to know him, and connecting with him—understanding how he loves us and accepts us, helps us grow—is the best and healthiest thing for every part of our well-being.

The reality is, we live in a FALLEN world, and we are going to EXPERIENCE sadness.

What do you think about the idea that depression is a spiritual problem, stemming from un-repented sin?

I am not going to say depression never results from a spiritual issue, but that is largely not the common root of depression. Research shows there can be imbalances in our brains that can cause moodiness, anxiety or depression. I would also explore if a person has suffered a recent or significant loss in their life, such as a job or a relationship. The reality is, we live in a fallen world, and we are going to experience sadness. Jesus was a sinless man, but even he cried and felt grief.

What are some warning signs of depression and anxiety?

Depression and anxiety often appear together. Watch for changes in everyday habits, such as sleep and appetite: are you having difficulty sleeping, or sleeping too much? Are you eating more than normal, or not feeling hungry? Other signs include crying often or for no apparent reason, irritability, extended periods of sadness, not enjoying things you typically enjoy, feelings of low self-esteem, worthlessness, hopelessness, and, lastly, thoughts of suicide or frequent thoughts about death.

Do you have any tips and resources to help someone find a counseling relationship?

One of the best ways is by word of mouth. Ask a friend or a pastor for a referral. Churches often have referral lists. You can also visit Focusonthe-Family.com for a database of Christian therapists across the country. I always encourage people to know they're not tied down to a therapist. You may not connect with the first one you meet with, and that's OK and normal. You don't have to try to make it work; it is perfectly acceptable to request another therapist.

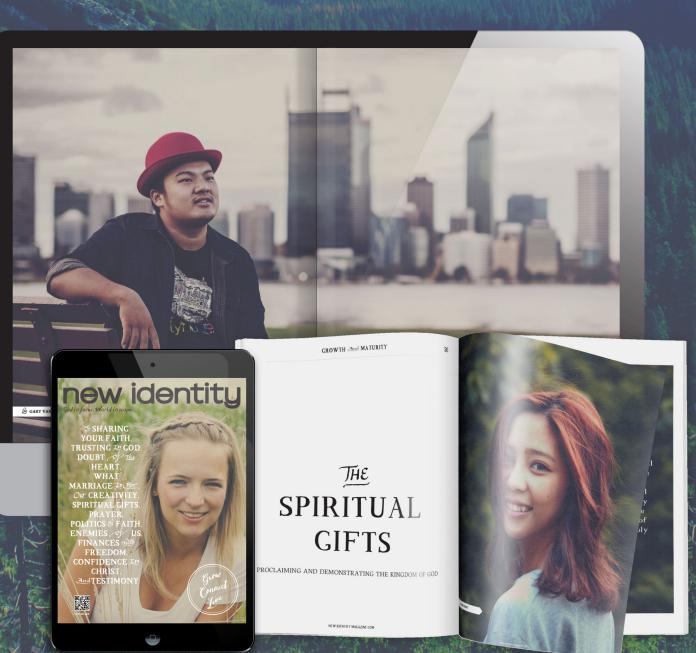
How have you personally observed or experienced the benefits of counseling?

I had someone mention the other day how counseling helped her be brave. I know that I feel more understood, more empowered, braver, and that my ability to implement healthy relational skills is strengthened. I also have a better, kinder, and more compassionate view of myself. And when you have a good therapist who connects with you, who supports you and encourages you to heal, they're insight becomes a part of you. Even when you're not with them in person, you still know they're cheering you on, and that is incredibly empowering and encouraging.



Lindsey A. Frederick

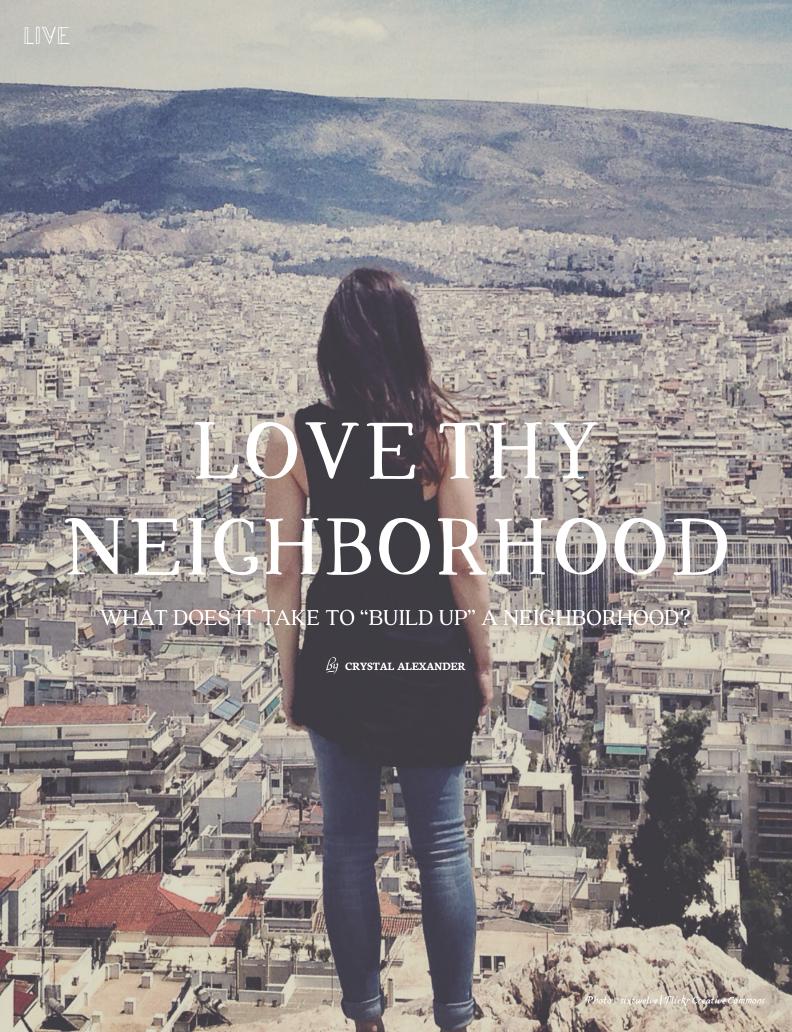
Lindsey A. Frederick is a communications manager in the Washington DC area and writes frequently about life, art, and faith. You can follow her on Twitter @la_frederick or on Facebook @ /lindseyafrederick



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Atthew 19:19 KJV says "Honor thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." In most cases it is easier to honor our father and mother than it is to love our neighbor as ourself. However, loving our neighbor is the second greatest commandment. Jesus was asked by a scribe, which is the greatest commandment of all? Mark 12:29-31 ESV, Jesus answered "The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

Romans 15:1-3 ESV says, "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." What does it mean to build up a neighbor? What does it mean to build up a block, community, or subdivision? It means building relationships and showing love to your neighbors. It means your neighbors become family.

I had the privilege of learning about Love Thy Neighborhood (LTN); an organization that's building up their neighborhood. LTN is an organization located in Louisville, Kentucky. They originally started in 2005 and worked mostly with their local homeless shelters and churches. Their primary focus was to help the homeless in the neighborhood. Although they started out very small, working with one church and 12 people, they made great strides.

With the continued support from the local churches and family, LTN is now partnered with seven different ministries and can have close to 50 people serving with them. Not only do they assist with homelessness, they also help individuals affected by the sex industry and those in various crisis situations.

Through the power of the gospel, LTN shows young adults (who participate in internships) how to become productive in their current environment. These individuals come from at-risk neighborhoods and are shown leadership skills. LTN provides a structure that educates individuals on a spiritual, personal and professional level. They

work on time management, resume building skills and fellowship. Ultimately their interns become "servant leaders," per Kiana Brown, LTN Operations Administrator.

In a questionnaire I sent over to LTN, Kiana Brown explains that an intern stays quite busy during their time in the program. Each servant leader spends fifteen hours a week doing neighborhood outreach and another fifteen hours a week for personal discipleship. This rings true to their expressed passions. LTN is about the Gospel and building relationships.

The mission of LTN is to spend time with their neighbors, churches, each other and God. Each member is encouraged to find a church to call home. Kiana noted that prayer and fellowship remains vital to their success. Their organizational passions include affirming the Christian presence in the neighborhood and spiritual formation.

Learning about LTN was pretty awesome, especially since my oldest son attends Northern Kentucky University. I thought of him and how he loves to help out. I thought of others who might want to help or may need help.

"Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like" (Luke 6:47 ESV).

So upon hearing all this, I had to ask Kiana, "Do you have to live in Kentucky to become a member?" and "Does LTN have any 'sister' organizations?" She answered with good news!

First, anyone can apply to be a member. When you become a member, you choose your Service Terms. A Service Term is held in Louisville Kentucky and consists of two eleven month schedules, one starting in September and the other in January. They have a summer term where you can serve from late May to mid-August. Per the website, lovethyneighborhood.org; you could even come in the summer and stay all year. Nevertheless, you will live within a community based on faith, fellowship and healing. Second, LTN is a unique organization and has inspired many, including the neighborhoods in Seattle, Washington. Kiana shared with me that Serve Seattle is considered their "sister" organization. They work pretty much the same way as LTN.

God will give us GRACE, but never promised it would be EASY.

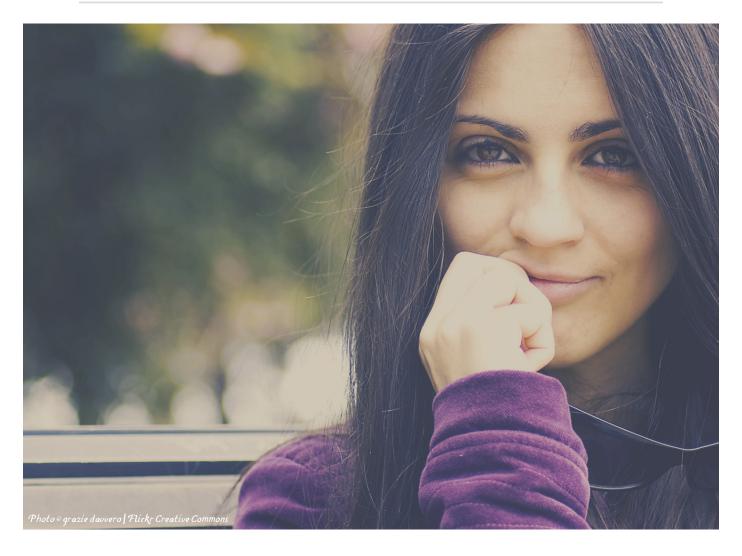
So what does it take to build up a neighborhood? I wanted to know. How does someone start an organization like LTN in their own neighborhood? The answer I got was not what I wanted. However it was real and honest. It was the best advice one could get. Kiana simply said, find like-minded individuals, get advice, do a ton of research and pray a lot! Her answer showed me the difference between a salesperson and a person truly working from the heart. As a society, we have become accustomed to hearing the glamour stories, used to hearing that there's a quick fix or that success is bliss. Often we are blindsided by the work it takes to truly succeed, we lose faith, hope or interest.

Remember as in Luke 6:46 when Jesus spoke to the multitude of people from Judaea, Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, "Why

do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do the things which I tell you?" It is so easy to cry out to the Lord and then not love thy neighbor as thy self. God will give us grace, but never promised it would be easy. Maybe you're not quite sure how to love your neighbor. It's going to take even more time to love a neighborhood. Maybe you have to start with introducing yourself first. Stay encouraged and don't forget those who are on this path; organizations like LTN and Serve Seattle. So spread the word, donate and find ways to serve. You can even start right at your own local church. Being an active member of a church was a significant factor in the creation of LTN. Kiana wrote, "We love the local church and and participation is a crucial piece of our program." Their continued efforts echo throughout their community. For more information or to get involved visit lovethyneighborhood.org



Crystal Alexander has moved around a lot-Chicago, to Denver to Palm Springs-all for love, life and the pursuit of happiness. She wants to share all she has learned and continues to learn about how she sees and feels the world, through God, love, life and sacrifice. JARGON 56



SANCTIFIED

CHRISTIAN LINGO EXPLAINED

By RAMON MAYO

anctified comes from the Latin word sanctus. Sanctus basically means holy or set apart. So when Christians use the word sanctified they are basically talking about being set apart for God and his purposes. In the Old Testament, being 'set apart' was extremely difficult for the average Israelite, let alone anyone else. There were 613 (by most counts) commands in the Old Testament Law that you had to get right in order to even be qualified as set apart or "holy." You had to eat the right foods, wear the right clothes, make the right sacrifices, and on top of that you had to be free from sin. This is a tall order but God wanted to show just how different he is from humanity. God is holier than we could ever imagine. So God chose to sanctify or set apart the nation of Israel from all the other nations. God wanted to show humanity just what kind of God they were encountering.

Here's the problem, the people of Israel fell short of God's requirements for holiness over and over again. They revealed that our human condition is pretty much the opposite of holiness. They failed in every way imaginable. They rejected God and worshipped statues shaped like calves, and fish, and all kinds of other animals. On top of that they cheated and oppressed each other because they lost connection with the one true God. It became so bad that God allowed their nation to be conquered and scattered all over the earth. So how could God have a people on earth who would be sanctified or set apart for him?

Some years later Jesus comes on the scene, and physically he pretty much blends in with the rest of the population. He is a poor, working-class carpenter born in a town off the beaten path. Here's

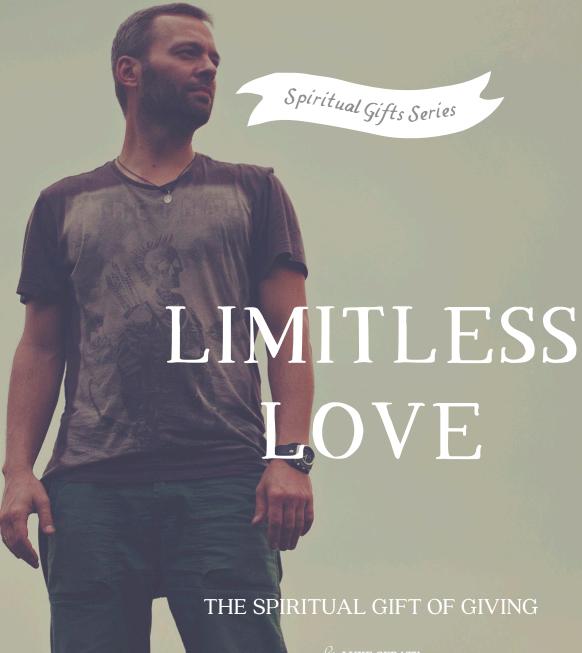
the thing, Jesus is so radical that he doesn't just integrate into society, he transforms it. He heals lepers. He opens the eyes of the blind. He loves and embraces everyone around him. He confronts the religious establishment. In other words, Jesus is different. Set apart. Sanctified. Not only that, but on the night before he died, he prayed in the garden that his disciples would be sanctified, or set apart, by the truth (John 17:17). He declared that they were not of the world (v.16) but that he sent them into the world (v.18)

And so here we are, more than 2,000 years later, as followers of Christ, sanctified and set apart. It's not by the clothes we wear or the food we eat. It's not even by whether we smoke or drink or cuss. Some have tried to be set apart by their political affiliation. Others have tried to be set apart by their doctrine or theology. The truth is that followers of Christ are set apart because of their relationship with Jesus, the set apart one. This doesn't mean that Christians are identifiable at first glance. There is no badge to identify them except by the love of Jesus overflowing in their hearts and into the lives of those around them. The love that they offer is what sets them apart. It fulfills all the commands of the Old Testament Law (Romans 13:8-10). That's what it means to be sanctified.



Ramon Mayo

Ramon Mayo is an author and speaker. He resides in the Greater Chicago area with his wife Yvette and his three children Kaydon, Syenna and MercyAnna. He recently published his first book, a Christian Black History Devotional, titled His Story, Our Story. You can check it out at Amazon.com. Also check out his blog at RamonMayo.



By LUKE GERATY

hen talking about spiritual gifts, people are often quick to think about special abilities that the Holy Spirit provides. This can include controversial gifts like tongues, interpretation of tongues, healings, and prophecy or can include leadership, preaching, and administration. All of these are listed as spiritual gifts in the New Testament, so this comes as no surprise. But did you know that one of the spiritual gifts that the Apostle Paul lists is giving? Yes, you read that correctly! Giving can be a Spirit empowered activity.

Over the past few issues, we have discussed the spiritual gifts as empowerments of the Spirit, given to build up the church and help with God's mission. We've also talked about the controversial gift of tongues (and interpretation). In this article, I want to spend some time talking about a spiritual gift that we often overlook, ignore, or misunderstand.

Now I probably need to make a clarification. When it comes to the subject of "giving," people can become very uncomfortable. The fact that *many* church leaders have been caught misappropriating funds, twisting Scripture for their own personal gain, and manipulating people to give for the

wrong reasons has caused a lot of people hesitation in talking about giving. Yet this is where we need to make a careful observation about Spirit empowered giving. The spiritual gift of giving can apply to financial contribution, but it isn't *limited* to it.

The Apostle Paul wrote the following to the Romans:

"If your gift... is giving, give generously." (Rom. 12:8)

Our Bibles' translate the Greek word *metadidōmi* as "giving" and this Greek word, when properly translated, means... *drum roll*... "giving." Yes, our translations are totally fine. The spiritual gift of giving, as granted from the Holy Spirit, should be done with *generosity* when executed properly. But what does generous giving, as a spiritual gift, look like?

"THEY'D GIVE YOU THE SHIRT OFF OF THEIR BACK"

About ten years ago I was teaching a class on spiritual gifts and was reading through Romans 12

when I came upon Paul's statement about giving. As I studied the verse and did my best to understand what he meant, I came to the conclusion that the Holy Spirit *clearly* gave some people the ability to function as *givers* in ways unique to other people in the Church.

Once I acknowledged that this was a spiritual gift, I started to notice that there were certain people who really stood out in reference to their giving. For example, there's a man I attend church with named Mike and people are always saying things about him like, "Mike would give you the shirt off of his back." While he never publicizes the things he's done for people, I have had people tell me that he has given them hundreds of dollars. Others have told me he showed up at their house to do an abundance of manual labor. I know that he's cut down trees and made firewood for the elderly. Mike, I believe, has the Spirit empowered gift of giving, and you see it in how he generously contributes from his finances, time, and abilities. He's one of the most giving people I've ever met.

Two of my closest friends are a married couple named Katy and John. These two are also great examples of people who appear to have the spiritual

I started to NOTICE that there were CERTAIN people who really stood out in reference to their GIVING

gift of giving. Whenever they hear about a person who has specific needs or who is facing life's challenges, they'll pray and God will inspire them to do amazing things in order to help that person. They've helped organize meals for people unable to cook. They have given money to people unable to afford essentials and have demonstrated time and again they like to give generously. They, like Mike, would give the shirts off of their backs to people in need.

WHAT IF YOU PRAYED FOR GOD TO EMPOWER YOU TO GIVE GENEROUSLY

Given that the apostle Paul wrote that Christians living in the ancient city of Corinth should strongly desire the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 14:1), what would happen if Christians started asking for the Holy Spirit to empower them to give generously? What if you asked the Holy Spirit, right now, to give you the ability to contribute generously for the cause of the kingdom of God?

I believe that the world would be totally different if the Church could better give. And while spiritual gifts are distributed according to the sovereign will of the Holy Spirit, we're also told that we should desire the spiritual gifts. I believe this tension of asking and trusting God simply means that we should ask God to help us be generous givers and trust that he will give us the gifting we need.

So what if you asked God to give you a special ability to give? What if you asked the Holy Spirit

to speak to your heart *right now* about situations around you that could use a touch of the kingdom?

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF GIVING POWERFULLY PROCLAIMS THE GENEROSITY OF THE KINGDOM

As all spiritual gifts have the ability to point back to the God who gives them, the gift of generous giving is a powerful way to proclaim the generosity found in the kingdom. Have you ever stopped to think about how generous God actually is?

God the Father is so generous that he sent his Son, Jesus to redeem us from sin. God the Son is so generous that he left heaven to come to earth and save us. God the Spirit is so generous that he fills and dwells in all of God's people. The gospel of the kingdom is so generous that it welcomes all, regardless of their gender, age, skin color, or previous history.

Being a generous giver means that someone gives

abundantly, freely, and in a completely unselfish way. One of my favorite verses in the Bible that so richly communicates how *generous* God is with his love to us is found in 1 John 3:1:

"See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!"

God's generous love means that we are invited into his family as his heirs and given the status of being his first-borns who receive the incredible inherited promise of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:6).

Each of the manifestations of generous giving, inspired by the Spirit, serve as a signpost of God and his kingdom. In the same way that God has generously provided salvation through the giving of himself, members of the Church are able to generously give their time, energy, and finances in order to communicate and point back to God's giving. In other words, we can give because we have first received.

GIVING BY THE SPIRIT OFTEN IS A BYPRODUCT OF THE GIFT OF FAITH

It is important to realize that the spiritual gift of giving is something that comes *from* and *glorifies* God. When Paul teaches the Romans who have the gift of giving to give generously, he means to encourage them to give with these qualifications in mind. They are not to give with ulterior motives or in a way that distracts from Jesus and his kingdom.

This kind of giving, as in the generous expressions of the Holy Spirit, often requires a great deal of faith. It should come as no surprise that one of the spiritual gifts that Paul lists just happens to be *faith* (1 Cor. 12:9). This is not the same type of faith that the Spirit gives in relation to trusting in Jesus for salvation. The New Testament scholar Gordon Fee explains this well:

"While it is true that Paul considers the "faith" that leads to salvation to be the work of the Spirit in the believer's life, what he has in mind here is the special gift of supernatural faith that can "move mountains," mentioned again in 13:2. It probably refers to a supernatural conviction that God will reveal his power or mercy in a special way in a specific instance."

Over the years, the examples of the gift of giving

that I've observed often have been the result of what I'd consider "supernatural faith." The Holy Spirit seems to inspire people to give abundantly in ways that can only be said to express the radical faith that God will provide. I know one married couple who felt that the Lord had told them to commit to giving a very large sum of money toward a ministry focused on orphans, even though that commitment was beyond their own personal means. In fact, apart from a miracle, if they gave that sum they were going to be eating ramen noodles for a very long time! Yet after praying about it and talking to people they respected and trusted, they became more convinced that God was calling them to do it anyway. So after they made their commitment known to the ministry, they were miraculously provided with far more money than they had even imagined! In the end, they were able to give hundreds of thousands of dollars toward helping children without parents. It was a complete miracle all the way around, and it started with the gift of faith to give generously. Now this doesn't mean that just because you give generously you are going to automatically receive an abundant overflow of cash-money! Some television preachers make it sound like God is an ATM machine. No, we're called to be good stewards of what what we

have and the Bible does not teach that giving is a guarantee for "riches" (see 1 Tim. 6:17). This couple only took this step of faith because they believed that God led them to make that commitment. They were generous because the Holy Spirit gave them a huge measure of faith and then the strength to follow it through... and then hundreds of thousands of dollars flowed into the kingdom for the sake of orphans!

I'd like to invite you to pray this prayer with me:

"Father in heaven, thank you for the generous gifts you have given me. You have given me salvation, and you have given me your Spirit to dwell in me and empower me to build up your church and to help the world around me. Would you please give me the gift of giving so that I can generously proclaim your love? I trust you and love you. In Jesus name, amen."



luke Geraty

Luke Geraty is a young budding pastor/theologian interested in ecclesiology, missional theology, and coffee. Husband of one, father of five, and deeply committed to proclaiming Jesus and the kingdom, Luke contributes regularly to ThinkTheology.org, MultiplyVineyard.org, and VineyardScholars.org.

new identity

Dear God,

Thank you for the opportunity to read the stories of what you are doing in the lives of others. I desire to know you more and find my purpose and identity in you. I want to take my first steps by simply coming to you and asking you to forgive me for all the things that have kept me from you. Jesus, I recognize that my sins are forgiven be cause you cleared all my wrongs on the cross. May you cleanse me and make me new. Holy Spirit, guide me in all truth and give me the strength to follow in your ways.

In Jesus' name, Amen