

new identity

God in focus. World in scope.

MAGAZINE

EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE?

Rethinking Philippians 4:13

GOD OF THE EVERYDAY

*Being mindful of God
in every moment*

CHRISTIAN "HYPOCRISY"

*Counterfeit character
and the Church*

A Life of Less A Heart for More

*Exploring the benefits of the
minimalist lifestyle*

How To Survive Your Quarter-Life Crisis

*Overcoming anxiety and
boldly facing your future*



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

OUR VISION

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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DIRECTED DREAMS

"But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him' these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God." -1 Corinthians 2:9-12

After I graduated from college I had my own quarter-life crisis (see Michelle Saldivar's article on the topic on page 64). I had gone into college a marine biology major and left with a degree in business administration. My goal as a graduate? To work in creative advertising, coming up with slogans, clever play-on-words, brainstorming graphic design ideas and consumer responses all within a dynamic team environment. My result as a working professional? A rude awakening to the realities of the business in a very unfulfilling internship at an ad agency occupied by solo work.

My picture perfect idea of my future began to fade away. What was I going to do now that the job I had worked so hard towards wasn't actually the job I had thought it to be? I felt lost. I felt purposeless. I had thrown so much of my personal value into my "career."

I needed the Lord to help me forge a new path. I knew I wasn't cut out for advertising, but I didn't want my degree to be a waste either. Searching online for a job in magazines (a lifelong passion) or a graduate program in journalism, nothing seemed to stick. Then I came upon a magazine that was produced by a nonprofit organization. I felt the Holy Spirit speak to my heart something like, "Starting a nonprofit magazine? That could work." New Identity Magazine was what came out of that inspiration.

Paul quotes Isaiah 64:4 in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, when he says "But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him' – these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit." During my quarter life crisis, I had put too much emphasis on my degree and my own plans, while not allowing the Holy Spirit to shape my dreams until my own strategy had run its course. I think God would rather have us trust him throughout the journey, rather than when we feel we're out of options. God knows so much more about us than we do.

In this issue Bethany Wagner talks about how we can be mindful of God in every moment, and Greg Whyte talks about what Paul means when he says we can "do all things through him who gives us strength." We have a great advocate in the Holy Spirit. He is on our side even when things are unknown and we should listen to him. When Jesus gifted us with the Holy Spirit, he said he would be with us always (Matthew 28:20) and we can rely on him to guide us into unfamiliar territory.

Cailin

GROW





IN PURSUIT *of* INTIMACY

CULTIVATING OUR RELATIONSHIP
WITH GOD THROUGH REST

by HANNAH HELMS

Back in 2007, during my junior year of college, I was a resident assistant in the dorms, and I spent that entire year going to bed at 2:00 am then waking up each morning at 8:00 am. I felt tired most of the time, but not particularly exhausted. That six-hour stint of sleep each night was enough to keep me going and fuel my class schedule, dorm responsibilities, on campus job, coffee dates with friends, and anything else I crammed into my calendar.

When I got pregnant with my oldest child back in 2013, I was told countless times by well-intentioned friends and acquaintances to “sleep now while you can!” This had to have been some sort of joke because three months into my pregnancy I started waking up multiple times during the night to pee. Then I had my daughter and I woke up multiple times to feed her. Then, when she was six months old I got pregnant again and was back to peeing. Then that baby was born and I was back to night feedings, and it wasn’t until the first week of July 2016, nearly three years after I originally started getting up to pee, that I was able to get a full night’s sleep.

And even though I’m back to sleeping, I’m always tired. More often than not, I’m exhausted because on top of my babies, I also have a husband, a job, a never-ending stack of dishes, laundry, church events, community outreach work, and anything else I can cram into my calendar.

RESTING is something that God VALUES, as evidenced in the creation story in the book of Genesis.

Over the past three months, as I’ve sifted through ideas of what discipline to add, what additional thing I could fit into my day-to-day to build up my relationship with God, the only thing that came to me was the word Sabbath—a word that means rest.

So, friends, I invite you to join me in the Discipline of Rest.

It seems odd, doesn’t it, that resting would be something that requires practice? Clearly, I am not that good at it though, or I wouldn’t be so exhausted. And I am willing to bet that many of you who have grown up in a culture or family that values productivity, hard work, multi-tasking, or simply “doing things”

may also struggle with incorporating rest into your daily life.

Resting is something that God values, as evidenced in the creation story in the book of Genesis. In Genesis 2:2-3, the author writes, “And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.”

I think that God knew it would be a challenge for human beings to rest because it is something that he directs the nation of Israel to do in the book of Exodus and later makes rest one of the ten commandments:

“Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” Exodus 20:9-11


So with this in mind, I attempted to set aside a day for rest. I say “attempted” because I did not succeed. How

is it possible to rest with two toddlers underfoot? Despite my attempts to focus and finish my tasks so that I could sit and rest, the small humans who share my home tend to undo my progress.

I then tried to adapt my strategy. Rather than devote an entire day to rest, I would try to cut myself off from doing things by a certain time in the evening and then go to bed early. I focused on creating a bedtime routine, making sleep—the most literal form of rest I could think of—a priority. This worked a total of three different times.

And then, over the Independence Day Weekend, I attained an unexpected sort of success. My friend Rachel and I were supposed to spend Sunday afternoon running an information booth during a street fair downtown. It was after church, and right in the middle of nap time for our children. We had both been up late with various obligations the night before, and after our church service, we decided to forgo the information booth in order to be home with our families. Then we each promptly went home, put our children to bed, and then each napped for two hours.

I am fairly certain that at this point some of you are wondering if rest is actually a spiritual discipline, or if I am simply using this series on spiritual practices to hone my parenting advice and shirk off other more exciting spiritual disciplines by napping and touting



Rest is a gift
from God. It
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and reminds
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not God.

the values of sleep.

Hear me out though... the reality is that for many of us, especially those of us who err on the side of busyness and filling our schedules with meetings and obligations, choosing rest can, in fact, become a discipline that draws us closer to God. In his article entitled "Why Do We Need Physical Rest?" author Matt Capps asserts that if we forgo rest in favor of work, we are at risk of elevating success, power, and productivity to a place of higher importance in our lives than God. He goes on to explain that rest is a gift from God, requires us to give up control, and reminds us that we are not God.

In her book *Mudhouse Sabbath*, Lauren F. Winner addresses the theology and concept of Sabbath, which was originally a commandment given to the nation of Israel and part of Jewish practice, through the perspective of Christianity. She challenges the often touted idea that rest is about personal self-care and renewal, and instead emphasizes that our rest as humans is for God. A Sabbath is a rest that allows us to draw near to God. When God directs humans to keep the Sabbath because it is holy, he means that it is set apart for him.

When we take the time to intentionally pause from our tasks and give ourselves a respite from the daily grind, we can come back to our daily duties and our

When we take the time to **INTENTIONALLY** pause from our tasks and give ourselves a respite from the daily grind, we can come back to our daily duties and our **RELATIONSHIP** with God fully energized and more ready to **ENGAGE**.

relationship with God fully energized and more ready to engage. And when we begin to have a Sabbath as a day of rest, we can dedicate that entire day to God and keep it holy and set apart for him.

I'd like to challenge you to try the discipline of rest.

SUGGESTIONS FOR REST:

Set aside a day for yourself during the week free from obligations, work, chores, and plans during which you can intentionally spend time reading your Bible, praying, or engaging in a spiritual practice that is beneficial to your relationship with God.

If an entire day seems like an unrealistic goal, set

aside an hour each day that you will refrain from doing work, chores, or other tasks.

If you are the type of person who is perpetually exhausted and seems to always be running on empty, try an entire week of going to bed earlier than you normally do, and give yourself a consistent time each night.



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.

GROW

Spiritual Gifts Series



HEALING & THE KINGDOM COMES SLOW

ON THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF HEALING

by LUKE GERATY

A few years ago I was in Kenya, a beautiful country in eastern Africa. As a group of my friends, both Africans and Americans, were sharing the good news about Jesus, we approached two ladies with the hopes of building a friendship and sharing Jesus with them. As we began talking, we learned that due to multiple illnesses, one of the women could no longer hear out of her ears and had trouble seeing in one of her eyes. Immediately we had a strong sense of compassion for the woman, as it was apparent that her life was full of challenges and pain due to her blindness and lack of hearing.

Before I had a chance to even *think* about how we could help the woman, one of the young men I was with began to pray for the woman. He asked Jesus to heal her and for God's love to fill her up. Though I believed God could heal people, I was so shocked by the quickness at which my friend began praying that I found myself staring at him with wide-eyed wonder at what was going to happen!

If you spend any time reading the Gospels, you'll notice that Jesus devoted a substantial amount of time during his public ministry to healing people. Jesus healed blind people (Matt. 9:27–31), caused the deaf to hear (Matt. 11:5) and made the lame walk (John 5:1–15). He cleansed lepers (Luke 5:12–16), healed fevers (Mark 1:29–31), and even stopped a hemorrhage (Mark 5:24–34). Additionally, Jesus restored

a withered hand (Mark 3:1–6), replaced a cut-off ear (Luke 22:51), and healed a wide variety of other physical illnesses.

The Gospels, quite frankly, are full of story after story where Jesus healed people. Everywhere he went, Jesus spent time restoring the order of his good creation. As the kingdom of God came, people's brokenness and pain was healed. After all, Jesus inaugurated the dynamic rule and reign of God in his earthly ministry. This means that the *power* of God was on display and that physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual healing was experienced by many.

But does God still heal people? Or perhaps another way to ask that question is this: *Are we, the church, supposed to continue the ministry of Jesus? Are followers of Jesus also supposed to participate in healing ministry?*

Yes. Yes, we are.

THE SPIRITUAL GIFT OF HEALING

The Church is the Body of Christ, his hands and feet, so to speak. We exist to continue his works under the power of the Holy Spirit and toward God's great and glorious mission! The spiritual gift of healing is one of those ministries that are part of God's mission.

Technically, the spiritual gift of healing should be referred to as *gifts of healings*. Notice the use of plural nouns, “gifts” and “healings.” This is the best way to translate the Greek in 1 Corinthians 12:9, *charismata iamatōn* (cf. the ESV, NAU, KJV, NIV, and NET translations). This leads me to conclude that this category of spiritual gifts should be less about a person *having* this gift and more about gifts of healing occurring.

Unfortunately, many people are under the impression that *they* have to have *the gift* of healing in order to pray for people to be healed. But that is, quite frankly, not how the New Testament frames this manifestation of the Holy Spirit’s work. The fact that the Apostle Paul uses the plural nouns leads me to conclude that this “manifestation” is given not as a permanent “gift” to a person, but that each occurrence of a healing is a “gift” in its own right.

A better way to approach the subject of healing is to view the Holy Spirit showing up in unique situations and healing people in the areas where their life needs to be touched. So whether a person has the flu or has a heart attack or is suffering from depression, the Church *can* and *should* pray that God would heal them! *This* is how we continue the ministry of Jesus and represent *properly* the kingdom of God.

As New Testament scholar Gordon Fee notes, “Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the early church lived in regular

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expectation that God would heal people’s physical bodies.” The early followers of Jesus held to the hope of God’s healing because the Old Testament promised that God would “heal” his people. For example, in Isaiah 53:4-5 we read that it is by the wounds of the Messiah that we are healed. In the New Testament, Isaiah 53 is applied as a metaphor for salvation (1 Pet. 2:24) and as a promise given for physical healing



(Matt. 8:17). Throughout Acts, healings regularly accompanied the ministry of the Apostles (Acts 3:1-10).

PRAYERS OF FAITH, TRUST, AND LOVE

When people come to me and are suffering from any type of sickness, it is my assumption that God wants to express his love and compassion to them. As Ken Blue writes:

“If Jesus truly reveals the character of God to us, then we may cease speculating about and arguing over God’s will in sickness and healing. Jesus healed people because he loved them. Very simply, he had compassion for them; he was on their side; he wanted to solve their problems.”

I realize this doesn’t solve the complex question about why some people are healed and others aren’t, but I

believe we are called to live in the tension of trusting that God loves people and wants to rescue them from their problems while also knowing that God is sovereign, and that we live in a fallen world that has been deeply broken while *also* believing that God will ultimately make all things new.

HOW TO PRAY FOR PEOPLE

So let’s just assume that God is inviting you to join his mission by partnering with the Holy Spirit. Let’s assume that the people around you are deeply loved by God and that God wants to demonstrate his love for them. *How can you pray for people without being weird or coming across like a crazy?*

If you’ve ever watched television preachers, you might have seen them pray for people’s healing while doing really weird things like slapping them, shout-

ing at them, or doing lots of other weird things. Do you have to mimic those people's actions in order to see results?

I sure hope not!

Over thirty years ago, a man named John Wimber, one of the founders of and the early leader of the Vineyard movement, developed what's now known as the five step prayer model. This is a simple and practical way for followers of Jesus to pray for people's healing. The steps are as follows:

Step 1: The Interview (Matt. 20:32). This is where we ask the person we are praying for, "What do you need Jesus to do for you?" As you listen to the person explain to you their needs, do your best to listen to the Holy Spirit's promptings.

Step 2: The Diagnosis. Overlapping with step 1, this is where we attempt to identify the root of the person's problem. Why do they have the condition they want healed? There are a number of reasons why people may need help, such as natural causes (diseases or accidents), sin (committed by them or to them), emotional hurts causing physical or emotional pain, relationship problems (lack of forgiveness), etc.

Step 3: Prayer Selection. Invite and bless the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit. As you do so, do

your best to listen for where the Holy Spirit is leading. While you listen, you'll need to choose what type of prayer to offer. Perhaps the person needs you to pray for an experience with the Father's love. Maybe you need to command the forces of the enemy to leave. Or you need to ask Jesus to heal the person's eyes, ears, etc.

Step 4: Prayer Engagement. As you are moved by compassion, in the name of Jesus pray for the person. Remember, Jesus and the Apostles laid hands on people when they prayed, so don't be afraid to ask the person if they are okay with you doing the same. It's perfectly normal to ask people what is happening as it doesn't disturb what God is doing and can help you know whether you need to keep praying or if you should begin to thank God for healing! It's also okay to go back to steps 2 and 3!

Step 5: Post Prayer Direction. Just because you've prayed for someone doesn't mean they don't need more ministry. Has the Holy Spirit apparently finished ministering? Has the person said they are finished? Are you tired and need a break? When you are finished praying, make sure to affirm the person and encourage them to keep trusting Jesus. You may also want to encourage them to set up a meeting with a pastor or a counselor to talk about some of the things they are asking prayer for.

The 5 Step Prayer model is not the *only* way to pray for people's healing. It's just one model that is easy and practical for people to get started with!

A THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING, SICKNESS, & FAILURE

As a pastor, people often ask me the complex question about why people aren't healed. Many people have answers for that question, with some suggesting that the lack of healing is a result of not having enough faith and others say that it's because people have sin in their lives. I have an undergrad degree, two graduate degrees, and I'm working toward a PhD and this is all I know: ultimately, I don't think anyone other than God can answer that question with any sense of certainty.

Faith is certainly a contributing factor in some of the Gospel accounts of healing (Luke 8:48; 17:19), as well as the type of prayer that James 5:14-15 indicates should be prayed. Yet it's not the only theological explanation for why healing doesn't occur. In the New Testament we see that the kingdom of God has come, continues to come, and will ultimately be consummated in its fullness in the future. That is to say that we see expressions of the kingdom now and yet have not yet entered into the time where the kingdom is here on earth in fullness.

So while I believe we should be persistent and should pray, pray, and pray some more, I also believe that we need to live in the tension of the "now and not yet." Because the kingdom is not in its fullness, we need to have some type of theological response that adequately recognizes that suffering, sickness, and failure will happen. If we are living as Jesus' disciples, engaging in the works of the kingdom, we'll see "manifestations of the Spirit" (1 Cor. 14:12) that lead to people being healed of sicknesses that the world's doctors say are incurable. At the same time we will also attend funerals as we bury those we love. That's the tension of living in a world that is slowly experiencing the kingdom, as Kent Annan writes in *Slow Kingdom Coming*:

"Two thousand years ago Jesus prayed, "Thy kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." We see hopeful signs of and steps toward a better world where love and peace rule, but have to confess the prayer is still a long way from being answered. We're surrounded by a lot of speed these days, but this is a slow kingdom coming."

SEEING THE SLOW KINGDOM COMING NOW

As I stood on that dusty dirt road in Kenya, watching a bold follower of Jesus lay hands on a woman in

need of healing, I longed for God's presence to come and for her to experience the goodness of God. I went from being a nervous observer to an active participant. I too laid my hands on the woman, and I too verbalized the cries of my heart for her to encounter God's peace and power.

After we prayed for about three minutes, we had another lady that was standing nearby ask the woman being prayed over if anything new or different was happening for. But before her friend could answer, the blind and partially deaf woman answered our question in broken English and told us she could see! She began to tell us that as we were praying her eyes progressively cleared up until she could see everything around her just fine. She was so shocked she didn't even realize that her *partial hearing had also been healed until she started telling us she could see!*

And the best part of this encounter was that she became a follower of Jesus, was baptized, and became an active member of a local church in her small village.

This is why I pray for people to be healed and why I believe it's important for Jesus' followers to always be willing to pray for people to be healed of sicknesses, emotional pain, and of being outside God's kingdom. God is certainly sovereign and it is the Holy Spirit who distributes spiritual gifts of healings to people (1

Cor. 12:11), yet we read throughout Scripture examples of people having faith and trust in the Lord to heal what is broken, ultimately knowing that someday everything will be made right when the kingdom of God comes to earth in its fullness (Rev. 21:1-4). When we pray for healing, we need to pray prayers of faith, trusting God (James 5:14-15). After all, healing comes through Jesus and though his kingdom comes slowly, it comes.



Luke Geraty

Luke Geraty is a young budding pastor-theologian interested in ecclesiology, missional theology, and coffee. After serving as the lead pastor for a Vineyard church in Northern WI, Luke transitioned as the lead pastor of a Vineyard church in Red Bluff, CA. Husband of one, father of five, and deeply committed to king Jesus and his kingdom, Luke contributes regularly to blog SpiritChurchMission.com as well as ThinkTheology.org and MultiplyVineyard.org. You can also follow him on Twitter (@lgeraty).

A man with a beard and mustache is lying on his back on a dark wooden floor. He is wearing a light blue and white striped short-sleeved shirt and a grey patterned vest. His eyes are open and looking towards the camera. His right arm is bent with his hand near his head. The floor is covered with several dry, brown autumn leaves. The lighting is warm and soft.

GROW

EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE?

RETHINKING PHILIPPIANS 4:13

 GREG WHYTE



Since the autumn season is also one that means new beginnings to many of us – the fall semester is usually the first semester of most school years in North America; churches begin offering programs again as the regular volunteers return from their summer vacations; and for some of us, it may mean the beginning of a new career or job, especially as our summer jobs come to an end. And who wouldn't want to, with the crisp fall air and the amazing array of colors all around us? Either which way, the fall season is seen as a time of new beginning.

You may be asking yourselves what that has to do with the Bible, or with verses taken out of context. In a lot of ways, it doesn't directly. However, if there is one verse that is often seen around this time of year, it would be this one:

VERSE

"I can do all things through him who gives me strength."
(Philippians 4:13, NIV)

OUT OF CONTEXT MEANING

The meaning of this when taken out of context can seem rather encouraging on the surface... Have a difficult exam in a few days that you need to pass, or you fail the class? I can do all things. Competing for your dream job? I can do all things. Your team really

needs to win the next game? I can do all things. You see a beautiful young woman across the room, but you don't know how to talk to her? I can do all things. Never tried skydiving or bungee jumping? I can do all things. You really need that promotion at work? I can do all things.

DANGERS OF READING OUT OF CONTEXT

In other words, we assume that this verse is saying that God will give us the ability to accomplish anything, and will bless anything we set our minds to doing. Yes, very encouraging, and very American. After all, it can be read as a version of the American Dream – or Canadian Dream, if you live in Canada, like I do. But does American (or Canadian) mean Christian? Not necessarily. As you may have been seeing in this series so far, and will continue to see as the series continues, some of our North American values actually contradict what the Bible has to say, sometimes even with these verses and images that we are looking at together.

For instance, since we are Christians who believe the promises of the Bible (some even "claiming" the promise, which is why the American-born Prosperity gospel has also been nicknamed the "Name it and Claim it gospel" in some circles), one would think then that the promises that the Bible makes are trust-

worthy; otherwise, the trustworthiness of what the rest of the Bible says is also brought into question. It is for this reason that the Prosperity gospel can be seen as very pragmatic because its central question seems to be asking “what can I get out of this?”

But what happens if you don’t get that promotion? Or because you didn’t study, you fail the exam (despite how many times you “claimed” this verse)? Or despite playing your hardest, the other team still won the game? Or that young woman’s much bigger and much better looking boyfriend shows up? Does that mean that you didn’t believe the promise hard enough? Does it mean that God didn’t give you any strength after all, or at least not enough strength, and so this proves that the promises of the Bible are not to be trusted, or that God is powerless to keep his promises?

Not in the least! Rather, this is yet another example of misreading – and misquoting – a verse that was actually saying something else entirely (and promising something else, if you really want to keep your pragmatism).

THE ORIGINAL CONTEXT

The curious part about our modern tendency to pull texts out of context actually comes from an earlier attempt to find texts easier and quicker. In fact, the

chapters of our Bibles were only developed in the 13th century and the first Bible to use them was the Wycliffe English translation. The verses came later, the Old Testament in 1447 by a Jewish Rabbi named Nathan, and the New Testament in 1551 by Robert Estienne, a French printer and scholar, also known as Robert Stephanus. Before this point, there were no chapter and verse divisions in the Christian Bible.

Another thing to make note of (the same with the rest of this series) is the genre of literature that we are dealing with. Unlike certain holy books of other religions, such as the Quran for the Muslims or the Guru Granth Sahib for the Sikhs, the Christian Bible is actually an anthology, a collection of shorter manuscripts, each with its own genre. In the case of the verse we are looking at here, it is actually part of an epistle – an official letter sent from someone with authority that is addressed to a specific group of people, and that is addressing the situation of those receiving the letter. So, to more accurately interpret what the verse would mean for us today, we also need to ask the question of what it would have meant to the original audience. Once we do that, we may have a better picture of what it would mean to us today, because as Christians, we believe that the parts of the Bible, while originally written for specific audiences, also have something to say to us today as well. The task that I am talking about here in this column is a task that experts call “exegesis” (meaning to read

I have learned the secret of being **CONTENT** in any and every **SITUATION**, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength.

the original meaning from a text), and it is important because it helps us discern what the Bible *does* say to us, as opposed to what it is not really saying, but that our traditional or cultural bias wants it to say.

In this case, it is the apostle Paul, who is writing to one of the churches he had established as an apostle (which, to use more modern-speak, an apostle is a missionary who starts new churches – more on that another time). The church is located in the Roman colony of Philippi, and Paul is writing while imprisoned in Rome. Part of the purpose of this letter (which has a lot to do with our verse in question) was to thank the Philippian Christians for their generous gifts that they sent with Epaphroditus, one of the members of their church, and for their concern about his present circumstances.

Here is the verse in its original context (v. 10-19). For the sake of what we are talking about, I have removed the verse numbers, to help us better read it in its original context:

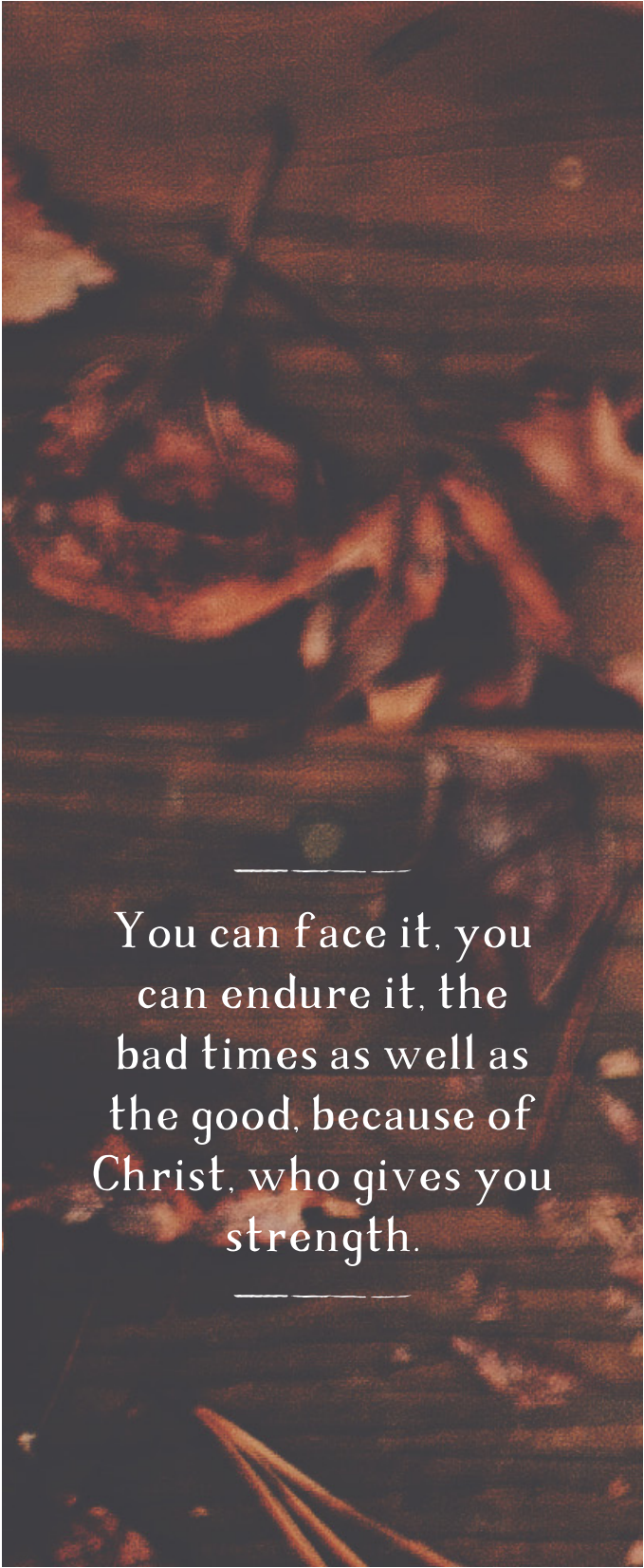
I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. **I can do all things through him who gives me strength.**

Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need. Not that I desire your gifts; what I desire is that more be credited to your account. I

have received full payment and have more than enough. I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent. They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. *(New International Version)*

HOW CAN WE REALLY APPLY THIS VERSE?

As we can see, it isn't really saying, or promising, that God will bless everything that we set our minds to. Rather, Paul was reassuring the Christians in Philippi by declaring that God had given him strength and inner peace to endure whatever situation life threw at him, whether it was a time of comfort or a time of difficulty, whether having everything he could possibly desire or facing great need and hunger, whether surrounded by friends and popularity, or being forced to stand alone. And if we were to look at all that Paul had endured since declaring himself a Christian, it's nothing to take lightly. He was been beaten, whipped, chased out of town, shipwrecked, jailed (at least twice), stoned (having rocks thrown at him); he faced deadly sickness, homelessness, poverty, angry mobs, scoffing derision, as well as the pleasures of friendship and successes in his work. Likewise,



You can face it, you
can endure it, the
bad times as well as
the good, because of
Christ, who gives you
strength.

Being **CONTENT**
means that you are
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ALREADY
given you and that you
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because you don't have
the shiny new toy that
your neighbor has.

if we look to Paul's example, we could also see that God could give us the same strength to endure these challenges.

Also included in this is the idea of contentedness, which actually corrects our very human tendency to always want more, bigger, and better (which is a huge part of the North American dream that I was talking about earlier). Being content means that you are happy (and grateful) for what God has already given you and that you are not grumbling or complaining about how you are never happy because you don't have the shiny new toy that your neighbor has. Which actually brings up the curious irony of Thanksgiving. Admittedly, it isn't as obvious with Canadian Thanksgiving, as ours is earlier (the second weekend of October), but have you ever noticed that on the day after the American Thanksgiving, which has traditionally been a day of giving thanks for all that God has given you and showing contentment, is Black Friday, a day of ultimate consumerism and "Get out of my way, or I will punch you and kick you because I NEED this package of socks!!!" I don't know about you, but I find the irony of these two contradictory days right next to each other to be quite hilarious. But getting back to seriousness for a moment... what would being content in all circumstances look like in this circumstance? What would being able to face all circumstances, whether luxury or need, sickness or health, happy times or sad times, look like in the midst of this?

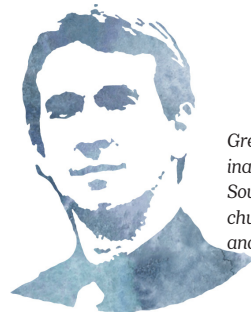
In a way, it reminds me of marriage vows – promises to remain faithful to your husband or wife through

every season of life, even those when everyone around you is telling you to give up on the idea of faithful, life-long monogamous marriage (usually during those times when you aren't feeling very loved by your spouse). After all, why not "upgrade" to something better? And let's face it – many have given up on the idea, and many others, even though they remain married on paper, have given up on any sense of intimacy in their marriage. That's not to blame them. Yes, marriage can be difficult. But to use Paul's argument – you can face it, you can endure it, the bad times as well as the good, because of Christ, who gives you strength.

In fact, we could expand this idea to other life situations also. Let's say you are tempted to give up on your studies because you feel that your current classes are too difficult, even though you need these classes (and this program of study) to achieve your dream at the end. In this case, stating that you can do all things means not giving up, but trusting in God to give you the strength to endure. Or let's say that you signed a contract to work at a certain job for a year, but you have entered a difficult patch and you are tempted to leave your contract early. Once again, because you have given your word by signing that contract, it is important that you stay with it for the sake of your own sense of integrity, if nothing else (especially if it's known that you are a Christian). In this kind of situation, we can trust in Jesus to give

you the strength to get through this difficult season to finish the contract well.

Or, to make it a direct parallel to the verse in question, let's say that you are travelling in a country or you become employed in an environment that is hostile to Christianity, and your Christian faith is discovered and you are pressured to abandon your faith in Jesus. It can be through direct persecution, like being thrown into prison, tortured, or threatened at gunpoint, or indirect, like being passed up for promotions, or having your home vandalized, or hateful comments directed at you (or behind your back in workplace gossip), or the intentional sabotage of your projects, or mockery for your faith and clean lifestyle. See, in a way, this is where the rubber hits the road, and it is in *these* times when you need to trust in declarations like these and make them your own, trusting that Jesus will give you the strength and inner peace to endure these circumstances for the sake of your faith. And you know what? He will.



Greg Whyte

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GROW



GOD OF *The* EVERYDAY

BEING MINDFUL OF GOD IN EVERY MOMENT

by BETHANY WAGNER

This summer, I spent two months working for a Christian nonprofit on the coast of sunny South Florida. There, it was not hard to feel God's presence. Every person I worked with had a close relationship with Jesus, setting strong examples of what it means to put God first. Every week we prayed for each other in the office, every other week we met for an afternoon worship service. I found a thriving church and went to three Bible studies a week. Surrounded by other believers, doing work that directly supported sharing Jesus with others, all in a stunningly beautiful corner of Creation, I was mindful of God with me at almost every moment.

But then the summer ended, and I came home. Home to the not-so-thrilling suburb I grew up in, to the freelancing work I've had for years, to the tedium of chores and cooking and bills and work that often doesn't seem to relate to my faith.

Meals, commutes, work, homework, laundry, relationships. These are the things that make up our everyday life. How do we invite God in, building habits that put him first? Here are some ideas, drawn from the examples of Christians seeking the same God in the midst of their very different lives.

A QUIET PLACE

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still

dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. —Mark 1:35-37

Abbie is a teenager who just graduated from high school and is gearing up for her freshman year of college. Amidst the rush of classes and homework, sports and friendships, she creates time alone with God in a quiet corner of her room. "Setting time aside to be alone and quiet, just God and me, gives me the foundation of peace I need," she said.

When cultivating a habit of spending time with God, it can help to establish a certain meeting place for your time alone with him. Practice meeting God in that place on a regular basis, and soon it will become your own sacred space. Like when you enter a gym and you feel ready to work out, or when you step into your favorite restaurant and you feel ready to eat a good meal, when you step into that place, you will train yourself to be ready to pursue God and be filled by his presence and Word.

TIMING

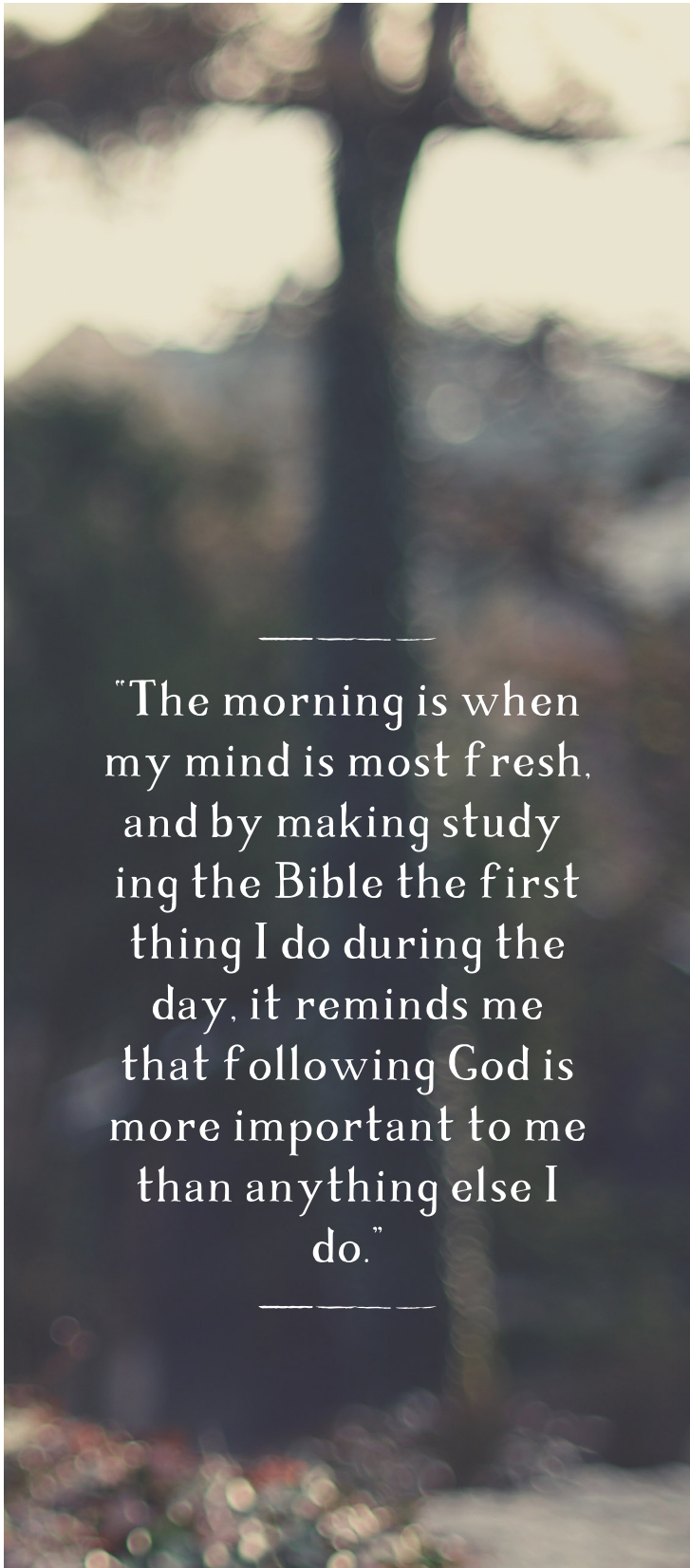
...but his delight is on the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.—Psalm 1:2

Kathleen is an elementary schoolteacher who spends the majority of her workdays corralling and teaching 29 high-energy second graders, getting to her

classroom before the school day starts, and staying after her last student leaves to correct homework and prepare lesson plans for the next day. She works well beyond the regular 40 hours a week with an ever-changing, often exhausting schedule.

Even so, she rises early in the morning to read the Bible and pray before getting ready to teach. “The morning is when my mind is most fresh, and by making studying the Bible the first thing I do during the day, it reminds me that following God is more important to me than anything else I do.” For many people, in the morning, the mind is fresh from a good night’s sleep and relatively undistracted from the demands of the day. For others, the evening after dinner can be the best time to really dive deep into studying the Bible. And even in those times when you feel your attention drifting, when you can’t keep from yawning in the morning or struggle to keep your eyes open at night, try reading through a few Psalms to still focus your weary mind on the Lord, the source of rest.

Those who work or attend school outside the home have a valuable piece of time to spend with the Lord in your daily commute. Case in point: Glen works for a software company in a demanding position that requires him to work early mornings, drive across town on an hour-long commute, and work into the evenings and weekends, making consistent time with God extremely difficult. He spends the hours of his



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commute praying out loud for the day ahead and for the people in his life, sings praise songs, listens to an audio Bible, and recites Bible passages he has memorized.

But what about those of us who don't have a regular schedule? What about those who work night shifts or long days from home, or parents who never rest from caring for their children?

Holly is a paramedic working by night on an ambulance in the Portland metro area. She works long 12-hour shifts for four days straight, then has four days off before heading back again for her long work nights. "Prayer and Bible reading are so easily neglected," she said. "It took several years for me to es-

tablish a rhythm within the daily flux of inconsistent sleep schedules and the pressures of a high-stress job."

Holly committed to meeting with God "first thing" when she wakes up. "This is a habit I can keep if I'm getting up at 6 a.m. or 6 p.m." she said. "The first voice I want to hear in the morning is the most important Voice." While routines can help, Holly points out that getting to know God by spending time with him is more important than any established schedule: "Whether I have only ten minutes or a whole hour before I start my day, I have focused my heart on what really matters."

REMINDERS

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of Christ Jesus in you.—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

God is not just present in our quiet times alone with him. He is present when we shower, eat breakfast, pack up for the day. He is present when stay-at-home parents can't seem to find a moment of quiet amidst the chores, meals, and caring for kids. He is present during work meetings and lunch breaks. "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" asks David in Psalm 139:7. "If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the

depths, you are there.” Certainly then, wherever the rush of our every day takes us, God is there.

How can we keep this perspective when life grows challenging or—sometimes worse—tedious?

One way is to set reminders for ourselves throughout the day, like signposts reminding us to stay on the path of walking through life with God. Put sticky notes holding Bible verses or the names of people to pray for on your bathroom mirror, in the kitchen, on the dashboard of your car. Set reminders on your phone periodically through the day with encouraging verses like Romans 8:38-39 or verses that inspire and challenge like Philippians 4:8. Reminders can also come in the form of accountability from trusted friends as you grow closer to God.

You can also go a step further by incorporating prayer and God’s Word into the very fabric of your everyday life. Sister Makrina, a Benedictine nun, recommends choosing one or two things you encounter each day to remind of you the Lord. For example, if you eat a lot of apples, train yourself to thank God or pray for someone every time you bite into an apple. When you wash your hands, let the running water remind you that Jesus is the true “living water”—the only thing that truly satisfies us. When you first step into your job for the day—whether at an office desk, a sales counter, or somewhere else entirely—make

it a habit to dedicate your coming work to God. This practice has changed the way Caleb, a graduate student studying physics, lives out his faith. He is faced with an ever-changing schedule and hours of tedious work alone, but “eventually, the everyday things you encounter in life—from a tree you pass on your daily walk to your desktop screensaver—become symbols of God’s truths,” he said.

And with this comes one of the most rewarding and encouraging parts of pursuing prayer, Scripture reading, and time alone with God: every time we rest alone with God’s presence, as we build regular time with him throughout our days, we learn and notice more the countless ways his love and goodness is already at work in our lives. In this way, even the most seemingly mundane parts of our lives become beacons pointing us and every person we encounter towards Christ.



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.

CONNECT



On CHRISTIAN “HYPOCRISY”

COUNTERFEIT CHARACTER AND THE CHURCH

By DÉLICE WILLIAMS

I once paid for gas with a counterfeit bill. At the time, I had no idea it was counterfeit. I thought the \$20 I pulled from my purse was valid, perfectly real. Paying for gas with it was supposed to be a routine transaction. Only when the cashier used a bill detector and told me she couldn't accept my money did I learn the truth. It was embarrassing, and I almost tripped over myself trying to explain that I wasn't a criminal. It also made me angry. Somebody who'd bought something from me had paid me with that bill the day before, so someone else's dishonest actions led to my public embarrassment.

Most other people in my situation would've felt the same way. Nobody likes counterfeits, and all of us would rather not experience the disappointment and anger of feeling cheated on any purchase. But the feelings we have about being sold counterfeit goods are even stronger when we sense that we're dealing with counterfeit people—phony people who pretend to be one thing when in reality they're something (or someone) else. Some of us have trusted such people and found ourselves annoyed, frustrated, and in some cases deeply hurt by them. Such things happen in life often enough, of course, but when they happen in the context of Christian community or Christian churches, the pain that results from them can become spiritual pain that might even threaten our faith. If we feel that we cannot trust those who claim to be God's people, mistrust of one person can quick-

ly become mistrust of everyone who claims to be Christian. We might even find it much more difficult to trust God.

Hypocrisy—the performance of counterfeit character—is often associated with the church. Many people who shy away from or outright condemn Christian churches charge them with being “full of hypocrites.” Sometimes these charges are justified: when Christians who are supposed to be loving (John 13:34), generous (Luke 10:34-36) and humble (Luke 18:14) also gossip, cheat, abuse people, and preach racist rhetoric, such “Christians” are rightfully called hypocrites. They are not behaving like Christ. They're using the label Christian to identify themselves, but their actions are totally out of sync with God's character and will. And if we take an honest look in the character mirror and see someone who is calling him or herself a Christian while not behaving at all like Christ, then guess what? The person in the mirror is a hypocrite.

Even if we haven't had personal experience with our own or other people's hypocrisy, many of us can point to Christian public figures who've been exposed as hypocrites because of financial wrongdoing, moral scandals, abuse, or other criminal activity. The televangelists that most people think of are probably the ones who've been involved in such scandals. The result is a tarnished reputation for televangelists,

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churches, and Christians in general. That is why people who are guilty of hypocrisy and of helping to damage the reputation of the church have so much to answer for. Even Jesus condemned this kind of counterfeit character, comparing one group of hypocrites to “whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean” (Matthew 23:27). He uses this kind of strong language more than once (Matthew 15, Matthew 16, Matthew 22, Mark 7). It's clear, then, that Christians, non-Christians, and

God himself hate hypocrisy, which is ultimately a form of lying. But in our rejection of the hypocritical, we need to be careful about a couple of things. One is this: one person does not represent all of Christianity. Five or 10 people don't either. There are many, many people in churches all over the world who are doing their best to demonstrate their faith through kindness, truthfulness, and compassion. It's a sad and terrible thing what hypocrisy has done in the church, but there are many people who are working hard to undo that damage by restoring relationships and offering apologies to those who've been hurt by counterfeit character in the church. These authentic Christians shouldn't be lumped in with the ones who've done wrong. I didn't throw out all my other 20 dollar bills because that one bill was counterfeit. We shouldn't throw out the whole church because some people are counterfeits too.

The other thing to be careful about, I believe, is this: there's a real and important distinction between a hypocrite and a person who is in the midst of a genuine struggle to transform his or her character into Christlike character. If you generally abide by God's command to be truthful, and lie to your boss about the reason you're not coming into work one time, then you've sinned and failed to live up to your beliefs. But if you feel guilty about it, confess your sinful action to God, accept the forgiveness that is available to you because of Jesus' death on the cross,

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and recommit to honesty as value, you are not a hypocrite. You are a person who failed and then repented. There are a lot of such people around. We're called Christians. And all of us stumble, many of us daily. But because of Christ's death and resurrection, we not only have forgiveness, but we also have power to recover from our failures so we don't have to fall into hypocritical life patterns.

For example, if a former addict moves into recovery, remains clean and sober, and starts telling other people not to abuse drugs, is that person a hypocrite because she is now telling people not to do something she once did? I hope it's clear that the answer is no. She's not pretending to be one thing while doing something else. She's made a break with her past and is working to be something new and better. Hypocrites are people who continue pretending to do right while doing wrong when no one is around to witness their performances. That's what Jesus meant about being a "whitewashed tomb": pleasant enough outside, rotten and disgusting inside. But if those same people who had heard Jesus' strong rebuke had admitted that they were rotten inside and asked Jesus for help to get clean, they wouldn't be hypocrites anymore. They'd be people who know their weaknesses and are humble enough to ask God for strength to overcome them.

Some scholars say that it is a show of this kind of humility that the Apostle Paul is referring to when he admits in Romans 7 that he often ends up sinning and doing some of the things he hates and doesn't believe in (Romans 7:15). His candor shows us that even people as venerated in the church as Paul have also failed to live up to God's standards. But Paul was no hypocrite because he didn't pretend there was nothing wrong with him. He didn't consistently ignore or gloss over his sin in the way a hypocrite would. In fact, he calls himself out for sinning: "what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Romans 7:24). Thankfully, for Paul and for the rest of us, there is rescue: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25).

This is not to say that there is no such thing as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is real and dangerous to ourselves and to those we hurt by our behavior. Any of us, Christian or non-Christian, can become hypocrites if we consistently and unrepentantly say we believe one thing and then act in a way that contradicts our beliefs. However, I believe that we sometimes use the label hypocrite to judge and condemn people who are simply struggling. I think that too often, we point to a Christian's single failing or maybe even a series of recent failings and condemn them with the label hypocrite. Maybe the Christian we condemn is

ourselves, in which case we're often left feeling pretty discouraged. But we need to remind ourselves of the truth that struggle is not the same as hypocrisy. Indeed, hypocrites don't struggle because hypocrites don't acknowledge that there's anything wrong with their repeated behavior. That's why Jesus called out that group of Pharisees: because they were blind to their own sin. Once we see our failure for what it is, confess it to God, and begin seeking God's help to overcome it, we're in a different place, a place in which God's grace can enter, heal, and transform our character. The important point is this: the failure that sometimes happens in Christian lives—even when it is serious failure—does not have to define us. If we're okay with doing the wrong thing and we act as if everything is fine, then we are hypocrites and we have a problem: we're counterfeiting our Christianity, and we're probably damaging the reputation of Christians in general. But if we recognize our sins and failures, confess them to God, ask for God's help, and continue doing our best to walk in the right direction, we are merely Christians on a sometimes difficult spiritual journey. God knows this. That's why there's provision for our forgiveness even after we've come to believe in Christ (John 1:9).

So yes, hypocrisy does exist. But sometimes the person we condemn for being a counterfeit is a person in the middle of a struggle to align his behavior

with his beliefs. Only God knows the true difference, since only God sees the full truth about other people's hearts. Instead of dismissing other people as hypocrites, or dismissing all churches and Christians because of the sinful and hurtful actions of some people, let's let God handle the labeling. We can focus on our own behavior and character, and we can start by giving other people room to recover from stumbles. Integrity is undoubtedly a good thing, and as Christians, we should want to walk Jesus' talk and live out what we claim to believe. We should strive to be good people inside and out. However, we have to acknowledge that there are times when we mess up. On those occasions, God's grace and forgiveness are available. And just as we need to accept that grace and forgiveness for ourselves, we need to extend it to one another. In fact, as John 13:35 reminds us, it is in showing grace and forgiveness to others that we show our own Christianity to be the real deal.



Délice Williams

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CONNECT

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

JESUS SHOWS US HOW TO LOVE

by CRYSTAL ALEXANDER

Sacrificial love in any relationship, be it with a parent, sibling, spouse, boyfriend/girlfriend, or friend means loving the other person with good intentions, good actions, and with no regards to yourself. Sacrificial love can be restricted or restrained by what you are willing to sacrifice in that relationship. Being afraid to love certainly affects the other people in our life. We may be allowing ourselves to hold back love based on fear of rejection, codependency, unrequited love, or for other reasons.

1 John 4:18 states that: “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (NIV). We have to look beyond our own emotions or feelings and love others regardless of what we fear or consider to be faults or sins in another person’s life. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Therefore we have to remember just as God has forgiven and will forgive us, when we humble ourselves and ask, we need to forgive and continue to forgive others.

Love happens on an individual basis and rarely at the same time. One rarely notices when they may have failed to give sacrificial love in their relationship. However, it becomes easy for us to recognize or feel we haven’t received love. We start noticing small things that aren’t reciprocated and make them big

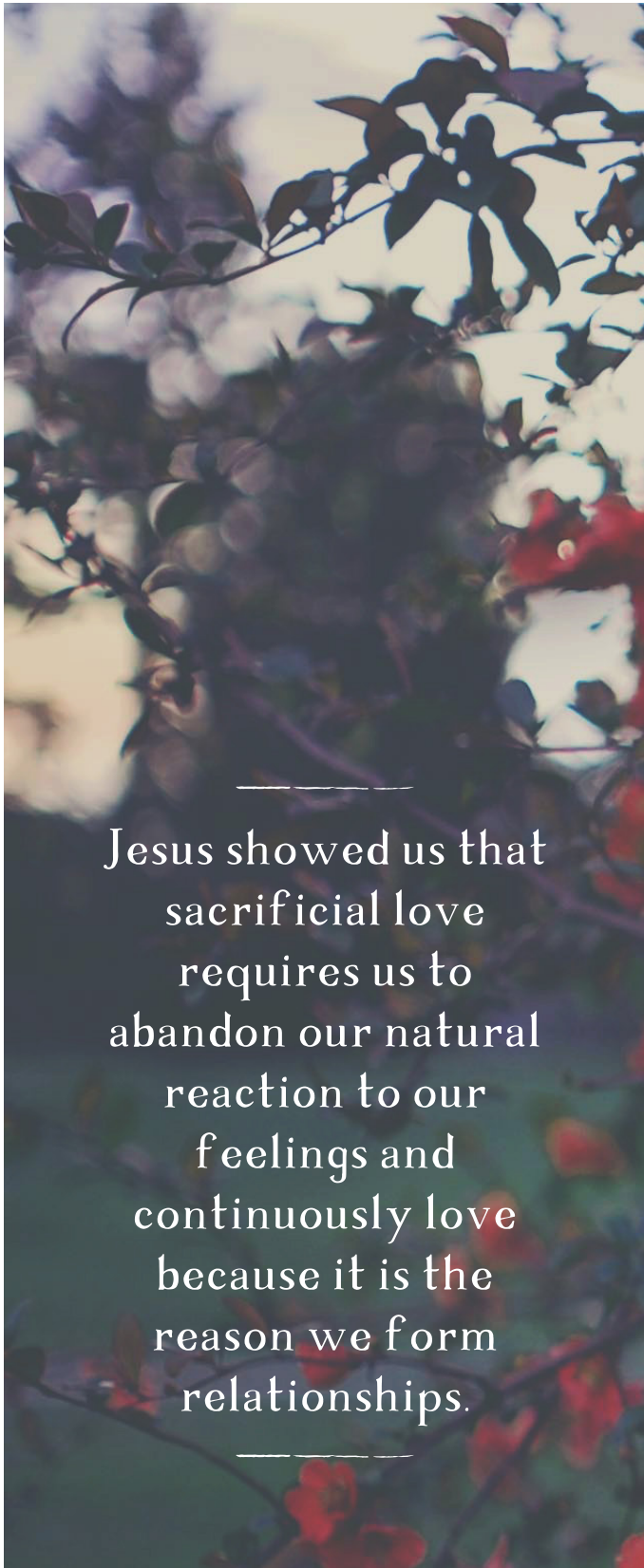
things. We notice if someone never says “I love you” first. We notice if a person doesn’t wait up for us. We notice if they never cook or buy us dinner. We know when our needs have not been met or when we are being treated differently than how we treat the other person. This can create a spiral, and we can become consumed with thinking “what about me?”

Ephesians 5:2 tells us to “walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (NIV). Even as our self-doubt of love starts to build, it’s important to remember to keep our minds off of ourselves and instead on how Jesus Christ loves us despite all of our shortcomings. Jesus did not disown his disciples when they could not stay awake with him (Matthew 26:43). Even though Jesus knew Judas would betray him, he did not ban Judas from the last supper (John 13). In the days Jesus Christ walked this earth, he showed us that sacrificial love requires us to abandon our natural reaction to our feelings and continuously love because it is the reason we form relationships.

Sacrificial love is pleasing to God (1 John 3:22). And 1 John 3:16-18 says, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in

deed and in truth" (NIV). When you sacrificially love in a relationship, you are making a choice to honor and respect the other's thoughts and feelings. You need to treat their feelings as if they were your own. You include their needs and desires in your actions. You learn to grasp a sense of honor and pride that comes from loving them. "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:12 NIV).

While the idea of sacrificial love maybe not sound complicated, living it out in this fallen world can be difficult because how we give and receive love is both universal and specific. I had a co-worker who was upset that her boyfriend was not a sweet talker, but she would tell me that he would always say, "you have always been there for me." So one time I asked her about the female relationships in his life (his mom, sister, etc.). With each one she mentioned he did not have a good relationship with them. I told her that when he says you are always there for me, it is his expression of love. But because she felt it wasn't reciprocated in a way that she understood she became frustrated and distant. She felt as if she was a dummy for being nice. He was not a bad guy, it's just that there was no foundation for healthy female relationships in his life. However, over time, he did come to understand the words I love you, and he did use them in his proposal to her.



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reason we form
relationships.

Proverb 10:12 says, “Hatred stirs up conflict but love covers over all wrongs.” It is the trick of the devil to allow us to see only one side of a situation. Will you love when you feel rejected? Will you accept someone’s apology, again? Will you move past your feelings and see their side of things, without an apology? Making that kind of sacrifice is tough, but it’s how Jesus would have us love each other.

I once heard a preacher say, “If you want your spouse to be more loving, then be more loving. If you want your mate to pray more, then pray more.” Sacrificial love can like Luke 6:31, “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (NIV). However, I believe a better understanding of sacrificial love is expressed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

Love is patient, Love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always preserves. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. (NIV)

God has shown us love through Jesus Christ: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live

While SACRIFICIAL
love may often be
difficult, God will
GUIDE us in how we
can best love others.

through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

Jesus shows us how to love. And while sacrificial love may often be difficult, God will guide us in how we can best love others. As Jesus says about the most important commandments, “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” (Mark 12:30-31). Putting God first will help us love as Jesus loved—sacrificially.



Crystal Alexander

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.

CONNECT

CONFRONTING DR. JEKYLL

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO LOSE
EVERYTHING TO SEE EVERYTHING

By STEVEN BUTWELL



I squandered the life I cherished by courting Mrs. Hyde. But what I had to gain was my life. “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?” (Mark 8:35-37 NIV). I entered treatment with nothing left. I was a shell of a man. I had lost my marriage, my youth pastor position, my other job that I had held for four and a half years, friends, money, and while in treatment, my home.

After my wife and I separated, I recall sitting outside my usual coffee shop reading the book of Hosea on the recommendation of several friends. (The book of Hosea is about Hosea remaining faithful despite a seemingly hopeless situation, a clear representation of God’s faithfulness to his people, Israel). Rising from my seat, having left my Bible open on the table, I headed inside to use the restroom. There was a line for the restroom, so I turned back to my table only to see a homeless woman approaching the open Bible. She lit a cigarette, peered down, and started reading. As I later headed back from the restroom to my seat in the courtyard, I saw through the window that the woman was now sitting and flipping the page, so I paused a moment, watched, prayed, then made my approach. I thought of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (see Acts 8:26-40). I approached her and said: “Do you understand what you’re reading?” She

replied: “The Old Testament has always been difficult for me to comprehend.” As a result of that statement I engaged Maria in a heartfelt conversation concerning the book of Hosea and the Old Testament in relation to who Jesus is. Maria and I also compared stories about how we had lost everything dear to us, given it away, willfully neglected those we loved, and she said words I will never forget: “Sometimes you have to lose everything to see everything.”

I am a prideful man. Just when I think I have it all figured out, I realize I’m just beginning. I entered treatment thinking that my problem wasn’t as bad as the other men and women in there. I mean, come on, there were people who had served lengthy prison terms, drug dealers, heroin addicts, and tweakers! Alcoholics aren’t on that level, are they? Am I even an alcoholic? I recall sitting in a group next to my friend Kris. Kris and I had entered treatment the same day, and I had spent many hours next to the fire in the backyard with him, laughing, smoking cigarettes, telling stories, and most of all, weeping profusely. Kris was there for me in my darkest hours. He held me many a time; showing up and shutting up. In those moments I didn’t need a word, I needed to be heard or held. On this particular occasion I had looked over at him in a meeting and said, “I only drink alcohol occasionally and sometimes take pills because of my bulging disc. I am not as bad as a heroin or meth addict.” Kris leaned over, looked at me intently

I was ANGRY. I blamed God, and I desired others to feel my INTENSE pain as well.

and said “You’re here, aren’t you?” I felt humiliated. His frankness taught me a valuable lesson—as clients of a treatment facility for drugs and alcohol—we are all in the same boat.

In a single statement, Kris had pointed out my glaring pride. He reminded me that I have no right to judge others based on my misconception of the “hierarchy” of drugs and alcohol. He also taught me that while here, I should also “take the cotton out of my ears and put it in my mouth.” A phrase that bears resemblance to the ever so quoted, but often misunderstood, judgement discourse in Matthew 7:3-5. Jesus teaches: “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother’s eye.” There is no

hierarchy of drug addictions. We are all equally in need of help. Proverbs 19:3 says: “People ruin their lives by their own foolishness and then are angry at the Lord.” And I was angry.

I blamed God, and I desired others to feel my intense pain as well. I drank to hurt others, while it was I who ended up on the bathroom floor. I wanted the guilty parties to suffer for what they had done. I demanded justice. I ordered that my side of the story be valued more than others. “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17). Treatment made me face myself head on. Treatment had me cross-examined. It is through the grace and love of the Lord that one finds solace from the trials and tribulations of this life. I had been searching for my solace, my “relief” in all the wrong places. Rather than choosing to run to Jesus in those moments, I ran to my mistresses Alcohol and Vicodin instead.

Entering treatment saved both my soul and my life. God used the staff, other clients around me, true friends who remained in my life despite the bridges I had burned, therapists, case managers, and pastors to teach me the most important truth: Jesus is the Savior of Steven Butwell (and the world of course) and nothing else can come close to him. And I needed saving.

Treatment wasn't merely a place to GET sober, it was where I was going to learn to STAY sober.

I laid myself bare before everyone while I was in treatment. I was open. Vulnerable. Exposed. Naked. I had no desire to hide behind anything, any lie, anymore (and continually choose to live this way post-treatment). Though the first few weeks were foggy, I remember that shame and guilt plagued me. I was administered drugs that helped to ease the pain and torment of withdrawals, but they did not ease my feelings of humiliation or remorse. I was required to traverse these feelings, many for the first time. Long buried emotions came bubbling to the surface.

The eighty-five days consisted of a daily routine of a variety of classes and nightly meetings. My days would usually include bible studies, therapy, prayer, introspection and meditation, relapse prevention and anger management. After three weeks, I was making progress. My overall demeanor had changed. The content was beginning to sink in, and I started to see

the bigger picture. Treatment wasn't merely a place to get sober, it was where I was going to learn to stay sober. I was taking it all in, and learning a lot about what made me tick, what my true hurts and fears were that drove my anger (fueling my addiction), and how I had used alcohol to bury and conceal it. I learned that I am not a man who carries guilt for his actions. I am a man who holds resentments. Points the finger. Loves the blame game. It's not my fault, you caused this. The irony is: when I have one finger pointing outward at those I blame...I would not acknowledge the three pointing back at me (point your finger and you'll see what I am talking about). Anger is a secondary emotion. It comes as a result of fear or hurt. My drunken (and sober) anger frightened so many people whom I love. I discovered my words and actions had a driving force that had been buried deep. Rooted as early as 4 years of age. A low level of self esteem, coupled with bullying, female rejection, betrayal, and abandonment has the capability to cause severe trauma, even fueling addiction and dangerous passivity in the life of a person. I was shocked to learn we are even shaped by memories and emotions we take in while in our mother's womb.

I resided on top of a mountain with eight other men in a log cabin boasting a panoramic view of Catalina Island, the ocean and Dana Point harbor for the duration of my treatment. These men became my closest friends, my phalanx. These men were invaluable to

my recovery (and continue to be to this day). Sharing meals together, cigarettes, coffee, nights of the Walking Dead, movies, the beach, and much more, we shared life together as a band of brothers. Keeping one another in check, making sure that one of us wasn't on the path to being taken out by the adversary (i.e, alcohol, heroin, meth, Xanax, cocaine, and the author of lies, Satan himself).

At one point in treatment Kris told me of a faith-based recovery ministry and how it had changed his life. He said, "You are going to ball your eyes out." I decided to attend one of the meetings. Sitting in the second row next to Kris, I heard a loud whisper from the Holy Spirit: "Tap the man on the shoulder in front of you." I hesitated, leaned over to my friend and said, "I think I am supposed to ask this man to pray for me." I will never forget him looking back at me and saying, "I heard the same thing." The man I tapped on the shoulder is now my sponsor. The role of a sponsor for an addict is a person who holds you regularly accountable to your commitment to recovery or treatment goals. Your sponsor is your confidant and the one (in addition to God) that you are answerable to; period. They walk you (sometimes push you) through your treatment program. My sponsor, Frank, doesn't pull any punches. His words of wisdom both from life experience and the Bible have changed me. His challenges, prayers, wit, and dedication to be bold and blunt have often made me feel as if I am the mortar

to his pestle. With Frank's help (and the Lord's), the grinding down of my old self allowed a new self to emerge.

I walked through the doors of my treatment center on January 25th, blowing twice the legal limit on a breathalyzer and barely able to sign my own name. I was taken in by those who shared my struggles and pain, and I am grateful. I didn't realize at the time, but I would not only be learning truths about myself, gaining knowledge and wisdom to remain sober and face many demons long buried, but I also would later be used to provide comfort to those who dealt with the same afflictions. I love the heart of God as communicated through the apostle Paul, as he writes:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all Comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (2 Corinthians 1:3-7 ESV)

The Lord Jesus has allowed me to have these hardships in life in order that I may use my unique story to impact the lives of others. My journey and treatment process has equipped me with the tools I need to “pay it forward” if you will. I was comforted by those who had gone ahead of me, those who had suffered extreme loss like I had. I praise Papa (the way I address my Father in Heaven) for having walked with me through the valley of the shadow of death, so that I too, could be used as a comforter to walk with those who trudge a similar path as I have.

Jesus says in Matthew 7:24-27, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (ESV).

My house prevailed; but not without damage or casualties. This was my flood. But Steven found favor in the eyes of the Lord. The Lord rescued me. My ark (salvation) was the love and care first of my Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, and utilizing friends who re-

I praise God for having **WALKED** with me through the valley of the shadow of death, so that I could be used as a comforter to those who trudge a **SIMILAR** path as I have.

mained, family, and the staff and treatment of rehabilitation. God worked a miracle in my life. I am sober today, with no desire to go back into that way of life. It's not living. I can say that with a clear conscience to myself. Now, as I “shut up and live my recovery” quoting Frank, rest and restitution will follow. And I look forward to when Jesus is ready to use me again. Here I am Jesus, send me.



Steven Butwell

Steven is a former atheist who encountered Jesus face to face at age 19 in a vision. Since then, Steven has devoted his life to serving Jesus in every facet of his life. Steven's other passions include: reading the Bible, writing, traveling, playing Playstation 4 and public speaking.



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SOLD OUT

CHRISTIAN LINGO EXPLAINED

By RAMON MAYO

If I said you were a sell out you would probably be insulted. No one wants to be called a sell out but in the right context that could be the highest compliment. Usually when we talk about someone *selling out*, it's a negative thing. It means they have given up their convictions and principles for some temporary reward or compensation. People have been known to *sell out* for salaries and positions of power. Some people have even sold themselves out for an orgasm or a gourmet meal. As the saying goes "Everyone has a price." That's one way of looking at selling out but there is another way to look at it from a Christian perspective. In a sense we all have been bought by someone or something. There is something or someone in our lives we are ultimately committed to because of what they give us in exchange for our time, money, attention, energy, and ultimately our lives. It's not a question of whether or not we are sold out. It's a question of for how much can we be bought.

For those who are Christians, being sold out is a positive thing. When Christians say they are sold out, it means that you are so committed to God that he can have your whole being. Everything you have is now at his disposal. This is the kind of person who can't be bought with anything. Her mind is occupied with thoughts of God. There is nothing that can sway her from the mission and purpose of God in her life. Many times this fluctuates for those of us who follow Christ, but deep down God is our greatest motivation.

See, the follower of Christ becomes sold out when they realize the price that was paid for them—Je-

When Christians say they are **SOLD OUT**, it means that you are so **COMMITTED** to God that he can have your whole being.

sus' very life. It's not that they can't be bought. It's that they are sold to the highest bidder. Jesus went through agonizing suffering so they could become his. He was whipped and beaten. He was insulted by Roman soldiers. His reputation was thrown in the mud. Jesus endured nails hammered into his hands and feet. His body was hung on the cross until he couldn't breathe anymore. He did that for us. That makes him the only person worth being sold out for.



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](https://www.amazon.com) or read his blog at [RamonMayo.com](https://www.RamonMayo.com)

LIVE

DIRTY GIRLS MINISTRIES

HELPING WOMEN WITH SEXUAL ADDICTIONS
HOLISTICALLY HEAL

by LISA GAGNON

Porn. We are only now beginning to realize the extent of its effects on the brain, relationships, and society at a time when sexually explicit content is just a click away. Christians have recognized pornography's negative impact for decades, yet it is still often considered a "male" problem within the Church. This can leave women who struggle with porn addiction feeling isolated and alone.

Crystal Renaud, the founder of Dirty Girls Ministries (dirtygirlsministries.com), discovered a dirty magazine in her brother's room at age 10 and became addicted to porn, continuing to view it as a youth group leader in high school. After recovering from her own addiction, she started Dirty Girls Ministries in 2009 to provide women with help, hope and healing from pornography and sexual addiction by creating safe spaces of accountability and community.

So, what's so bad about porn anyway? Fight The New Drug (fightthenewdrug.org) has compiled research showing that pornography is *not* private gratification without consequences in the real world. From a neurological perspective, porn releases dopamine, the same pleasure chemical found in addictive drugs. With the flood of dopamine, the brain compensates by removing some of the receptors, so that over time it will take harder and harder porn to get the same "high."

Seeing idealized, flawless, and submissive women on screen can also set men (and women) up for failure and disappointment in their real life relationships. Porn's version of intimacy is passive, cruel, and self-serving, while real love requires sacrifice, compromise, and commitment. Seeing women (and men) treated as objects online is more likely to make viewers desensitized to real abuse, and even act out the violence themselves. Add to that the drugs, abuse, and trafficking found in the industry, and we can see that porn is extremely damaging—physically, mentally, and emotionally.

As Christians, however, we believe that pornography also has a spiritual component. Though the Bible doesn't address online porn, it does speak often about "sexual immorality," or anything deviating from God's original plan for monogamous sex within a life-long marriage. Though there may be disagreements about how to apply verses about sexuality to our day and culture, the apostle Paul advised the Corinthian people to "flee" from sexual sin, because they were to commit their bodies (and hearts and minds) to glorifying God rather than themselves (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

Dirty Girls Ministries addresses the spiritual significance of porn as the basis for their recovery process. New members are encouraged to take the Personal Inventory, a series of questions self-evaluating the

scope of addiction and sexual activities, in order to “admit our true condition and know exactly where we are.” According to their website, addiction recovery involves “understanding the seriousness of sexual sin,” “evaluating where you are vulnerable to sexual sin,” “confessing honestly where you have messed up,” and “committing to sexual purity from this day forward.” Addicts accomplish these goals through five steps:

1. *Surrender*: “I can do all things through him who gives me strength.” Philippians 4:13
2. *Confession*: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.” 1 John 1:9
3. *Accountability*: “The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.” Proverbs 12:15
4. *Responsibility*: “Rise up; this matter is in your hands. We will support you, so take courage and do it.” Ezra 4:10
5. *Sharing*: “They have defeated him by the blood of the Lamb and by their testimony.” Revelation 12:11

Dirty Girls Ministries helps women through their recovery process with their free protected online



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community of over 2500 members. After joining, members are encouraged to form MeetAbility groups to work through *Dirty Girls Come Clean*, Crystal Renaud's memoir about sexual addiction. Then, the women find someone to keep them accountable and on track with their goals, take responsibility in mending broken relationships, and share what they have learned with others.

For more information about Dirty Girls Ministries, which is now a sub-ministry of WHOLE Women Ministries, visit www.dirtygirlsministries.com or call (913) 667-9492. There is also a form to request Crystal Renaud as a speaker if you are interested in facilitating a conversation about female porn addiction, or a variety of other topics, at your own church. For men, spouses, and parents, there are many other resources as well, including XXX Church (www.xxxchurch.com) and Blazing Grace (www.blazinggrace.org). Integrity Restored also has a list of books, websites and support groups (integrityrestored.com/resources-for-overcoming-pornography-addiction/).

Addiction of any kind is isolating, but Christian women struggling with sexual addiction may feel too embarrassed and ashamed to tell anyone. If that's you, know that you are not alone. There are many other women in the same position as you, and true friends will walk alongside you no matter what. Dirty Girls Ministries is a wonderful resource for recovery and

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accountability, and the message in their name is even better. Even the "dirtiest" girls can come clean physically from their addiction, and spiritually through a relationship with God.



Lisa Gagnon

Lisa Gagnon is a university student, writer and musician living in Buffalo, NY. She is passionate about promoting empathy and understanding through collaboration and telling the stories of those undervalued in our society. Lisa can be reached at lisagagnon127@gmail.com

LIVE

A LIFE *of* LESS. A HEART *For* MORE.

EXPLORING THE BENEFITS OF
THE MINIMALIST LIFESTYLE

by LINDSEY A. FREDERICK





What do you *really* want?” my mentor asked the first time we met. The question felt huge, and the answer almost too big for words. But it came as I listened to my heart bumping around my chest. It felt heavy and wrung out from old hurts and fears stashed in my emotional basement. “I want. . . *freedom.*”

As I cleaned out that space, I began to feel lighter, more confident, more peaceful. The emerging emotional freedom made me crave material freedom, too. Minimalist principles piqued my interest. I began to look around my apartment and ask What am I holding onto that serves no a purpose? What unused items do I still own because I’m afraid I’ll need them “someday” or because someone else gave them to me? Most importantly, I asked, What do I own that I don’t love? As the discard pile grew, so did my sense of freedom. This is exactly what the minimalist movement is all about.

“Minimalism is a tool that can assist you in finding freedom,” says Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus on TheMinimalist.com. “Freedom from fear. Freedom from worry. Freedom from overwhelm. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from depression. Freedom from the trappings of the consumer culture we’ve built our lives around. Real freedom.” It struck me: these aren’t just minimalist principles, they’re spiritual principles. Jesus tells us to give

In EVERY
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away, to him, the very things that weigh us down and clutter our hearts and minds. In return, he promises real, deep, soul-level rest. “I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly” (Matt. 11:28–30 MSG).

I packed up my things in boxes and bags, and then . . . I stalled. My possessions waited patiently by my door for about a month. Maybe more. The reality of breaking up with my stuff was uncomfortable, almost painful. It turns out some brain researchers at the University of Yale discovered the struggle is—literally—real. Pain indicators in your brain light up in response to discarding things you own or feel a connection to. *What if I need some of these things again? I asked. Do I have what it takes to live with less?*

MINIMALIST RESOURCES

Seven by Jen Hatmaker

Spark Joy by Marie Kondo

tidyingup.com
- Marie Kondo

becomingminimalist.com
- Joshua Becker

theminimalists.com
- Joshua Fields Millburn and
Ryan Nicodemus

theminimalistmom.com
- Rachel Jonat

In every transformational process, you're going to encounter some internal and external obstacles. How you respond can either be your path to further freedom, or further bondage. Millburn and Nicodemus agree that there's nothing wrong with owning things. Our problem is in the power we give our possessions. "We tend to give too much meaning to our things, often forsaking our health, our relationships, our passions, our personal growth, and our desire to contribute beyond ourselves." Minimalist principles are less about what and how much we own, and more about making conscious and deliberate decisions about the things that truly add value to our lives.

The words from Matthew 6:19–21 kept whispering through my mind as they echoed Millburn's and Nicodemus's ideas, "Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moths and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves cannot break in and steal. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be."

This verse is often applied to putting others first, or sharing about Christ, but I took it quite literally. I thought about what my storage room might look like in 20 years—filled with nostalgia and stuff worn and ruined by moths, dust, and mice. Why wouldn't I offer my unused things to someone in need? I had to face the fact that if I chose to not let go, then I was

choosing external clutter and chaos. All this while simultaneously putting myself at risk to reclaim or re-accumulate the spiritual and emotional disorder I'd worked so hard to clear. Because clutter begets clutter, no matter what area of our lives we're dealing with.

In her *Christianity Today* article, Margot Starbuck quotes minimalist blogger Joshua Becker as she journals her quest toward simplicity, "I used to view Jesus's teachings—on money and possessions and generosity and not stockpiling treasures on earth—as a sacrifice I was called to make today so I could have

greater rewards in eternity. But I began to realize that Jesus was just offering us a better formula for living.”

Minimalism addresses our freedom from material slavery in much the same way Jesus addresses our struggle with spiritual bondage. The Apostle Paul reminds us that when we decide to model our lives after Jesus, we are set free from spiritual slavery. But, understanding our limited capacity to remain unbound from materialism, temptation, and oppression, he warns us to “stand firm” and “stay free” (Gal. 5:1). “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (5:13).

I reminded myself my goal was clarity, not clutter. And I envisioned what life could look like: fewer things to dust, fix, launder, put away; more disposable income; more time to pursue passions, focus on health, connect with people, and create space to listen—really, really listen—to God. And when you know who you want to be, how you want to feel, or what you want your life to look like, the answers become clear and simple. Not easy. But simple. And so, I let go.

Don’t get me wrong, I am not a minimalist. At least not yet. But I’m understanding the value in approaching my life with more simplicity. Which I believe is at the heart of God’s best for us. Because when we say

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APPLYING MINIMALIST PRINCIPLES

“no” to one thing, we’re giving ourselves the opportunity to say “yes” to something better and more beautiful. And isn’t this the foundation of faith?—for our awareness of God to increase, we must decrease what inhibits us from experiencing him (John 3:30). We’re freeing ourselves to pursue the most important aspects of life: health, relationships, passion, growth, and service. What would a life of less look like for you?

Imagine the possibilities.

Living a reduced life won't happen instantly. It's a daily discipline. Here are three quick tips, from professional organizer Marie Kondo, to get you started.

Sort and purge by category, rather than by room. Start with clothes, then move to books, kitchen utensils, etc.

Nostalgia is not a friend of decluttering. If you're struggling over whether or not to keep an item, ask yourself "Does it spark joy?" or for the more pragmatic "If I saw this in a store today, would I pay to own it?"

Assign every kept item a home. Preferably one that's visible. Kondo says stackable storage solutions encourage hoarding.



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



GROW

HOW TO SURVIVE YOUR QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS

ON OVERCOMING ANXIETY, TRUSTING GOD
AND BOLDLY FACING YOUR FUTURE

 MICHELLE SALDIVAR

We've all heard about the mid-life crisis, but today, many young adults experience a crisis well before that: the quarter-life crisis. It's the scary stage of planning for one's impending adulthood before finishing college or when the realities of permanently and officially entering the real world start to sink in.

For me, my quarter-life crisis started when I began to internalize my self-doubts and insecurities about my future. The more I believed the doubts, the worse it became. I worried more and more about my future and began asking loaded questions, like "What will my career look like? Where will I live (and will that still be with my parents)? What will I do if I lack finances? And what happens if I fail?"

If you've been asking similar questions lately, and you're feeling anxiety, uncertainty, difficulty making decisions, and fear of failure, you have officially entered your quarter-life crisis.

Though you may be in the midst of crippling worries about the future, the good news is that as Christians, we have a very committed friend who is always there for us: God, our dear heavenly father.

While this loving father of ours has great plans for us, he is selective on when to reveal those plans, and sometimes it may feel like he is waiting until the last

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minute to disclose his master blueprint for our lives. This situation tends to be very inconvenient when you are in the middle of figuring out the path he has set for you. It's worse when everyone asks what you plan on doing with your life. "I don't know!" we want to scream. "He hasn't clued me in on that yet!"

The longer this question goes unanswered, the more we stress. Without realizing it, we begin to become impatient with God, the one who has given everything to us and truly loves us unconditionally. Don't blame him just yet; we simply aren't ready for the whole plan.

SYMPTOMS OF A QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS

Feeling Anxiety

fear or nervousness about what might happen

Feeling the need to control our lives and having a desire to plan where we'd like our lives to go is not uncommon. Mariah, a female Panamanian, Dominican junior undergraduate student shares her desire for control:

"My number one struggle in life is control. When I feel stressed about life or college, my anxiety can leave me on edge for hours or days. ... For me, it's hard to relinquish all my worries to God. Why would he care about something as little as an exam when there are orphaned children or diseases to cure? But I realize my mistake in putting a big God in a small box. I wasn't trusting God to pull through in every area of my life. But I have felt the difference of sharing my burden and letting God take care of me. It's crazy to think that change can happen through letting go and giving God the 'little things'."

At the core we all struggle to trust in God's goodness and faithfulness for our lives. This lack of trust leads to anxiety because we know deep down that we do not have real control and we cannot possibly

plan every situation or prepare for every scenario. In Matthew 6:25-34 ESV Jesus says: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" This verse is helpful in reminding us to put our lives in perspective, not be so caught up in the details, and to look at the bigger picture. While God does care about us in every detail, he doesn't give us the whole blueprint of our lives because he wants us to walk in faith with him. God wants to be at the center of our lives and life decisions. While the uncertainty can be unceasing, God has given us every reason to trust him. Repeatedly through stories in the Old and New Testament, he has come to our rescue and constantly extended grace (i.e. Jesus dying on the cross in order to forgive our sins and give us an eternal future in relationship with him is the ultimate fulfillment of this).

Desiring Control

Wanting to personally decide the outcome of our lives

Understandably, our human minds have a hard time relinquishing control to someone we can't see or touch. Yet, as Mariah put it, he has and will continue to take care of us. So "Cast all your anxiety on him because [God] cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7 NIV). God has something in store for us and we aren't always

clued in as to what that is. He wants us to fully trust him and the plan he has for our lives. When the enemy sees us struggling to fully trust God, he becomes that little voice in our head trying to fill us with doubt. It is our job to not believe those lies, but to believe in God, who only wants the best for us.

Alexandra, a female Puerto Rican senior undergraduate student is a natural born planner and likes having a system in place to arrange a positive outcome:

"I'm a natural-born planner so coming into college I had plans for my life. During my first few years in college, God so graciously and lovingly began to alter those plans. Before I knew it all my selfish desire was gone, and all that I longed for was for his will to be done. Though I didn't know where I was going to go, I was willing. That's a scary thing to say to God because he will take your word for it and he did just that. ... I wrestled with God because I felt he was withholding information from me, keeping me out of the loop from my own life plans which was horrifying for me as a planner. I wondered if he even had my best interest at heart because the waiting period seemed miserable and hopeless ... I soon learned that this waiting and listening period was only difficult because I was not trusting in God's promises for my life ... It took a lot of prayer, counsel from trusted people, and courage to take a step of faith into the unknown with God."

Distrusting God's Plan

Thinking that our life goals are more important than God's plans for us

From Alexandra's wise words, seek prayer and counsel when we are faced with anxiety about our future. Our community and support from others with practice on relying on God will help keep us on the right path of continuing to trust God despite the unknown and difficult road blocks or challenging circumstances. Have faith in God and wait on his timing for details to be revealed about our future. Sunny, a male South Asian junior undergraduate student, has experience in trusting God in his life that we can learn from:

"I have a lack of worry for my life when I graduate—not because I have everything figured out, but I trust in the one that does. I have many different options, and truth be told it can be overwhelming. I find hope in knowing that whatever path God calls me to, I can still be used to shine light on others. My main calling above any job is to be an ambassador of Christ, and I have faith God will always provide for me regardless of what happens."

Sunny is wise to realize that he doesn't need to have everything figured out in order to trust God. Being in a place of uncertainty is sometimes the best time to lean on God for guidance and reassurance.

Being Uncomfortable With Change

Unprepared for results different from what we expect

A lot of the time we place a perfect picture in our mind of our future. Unfortunately our minds are often faulty, because we usually don't know ourselves as well as we think we do. Jarumi, a black male junior undergraduate student says:

"All throughout high school I planned on playing professional soccer and majoring in computer science. ... However later on, through a series of events, the passion of soccer faded away, and I was left to really evaluate what I will be doing with my life. During that time, I began to learn about myself—how I was a natural leader, my love for ministry, and how I loved to be creative whether it be in poetry, photography or video production. As time moved on, my love for computer science grew. How would I know I would be happy in whatever career I choose all while glorifying God? At Urbana [an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship Conference], God revealed that answer... And he told me not to worry about how [it] would tie together, or if I will enjoy what I do, but just to trust him and be patient. And if he can speak the world into existence than I, myself, have nothing to worry about. All I need to do is follow his will, and rest in his love, wisdom and hope...And through my faith in God, I know that those hopes and dreams will come about."

Through change, God is with us. College is known to be a time of trial and error. Changing your major once or twice is to be expected, but that does not make the experience any less daunting. Like Jarumi, we need to submit ourselves to God and give these decisions to him.

Doubting God's Will & Our Giftings

Having no confidence in ourselves or in God's path for us

We all have doubts about our future, especially when we face failure. Yet, we forget that we are in a time in our lives where we are learning: learning about our career path, learning about ourselves, learning about God. We are apprentices and we will make mistakes, but we will learn from them and improve. God does not expect us to have all the answers. Like Kimberly says, a female Mexican junior undergraduate student, he just wants us to have faith in the good that will come of doubt or struggle:

"Putting my trust in God to lead me to where I am meant to be is truly a leap of faith—one that is sometimes unfathomable for me as a Pre-Med student who should have things organized and planned out in order to position myself for the greatest opportunities. Yet, I struggle to be excellent and my plans fall through time after time, which makes me wonder: Am I forcing myself to do my own will, not his? If there aren't bright fluorescent signs pointing me

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own UNDERSTANDING in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths STRAIGHT.”

to the next step, how does he expect me not to be anxious and dubious when I can't know for certain I'm going down the right path? I drown in stress and anxiety, fearful about moving on. But then I remember: Jesus calmed the roaring waters and stilled the fiercest winds (Mark 4:35-41). He is not asking me to make it through alone and unequipped, all he wants is for me to have faith.”

James 1:6 says, “But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (ESV). Our doubts make us uneasy, and make us fear the life ahead of us. God does not want us to live in this place of anxiety. I have struggled in this very area myself, but as my college career comes to its final chapter, my only option is to rest in God's love, grace, and wisdom and to know that he will not lead me astray.

If you have been feeling any of the above symptoms, let me reassure you that you are not the only one. Most other twenty-somethings are struggling along-

side you. Whether it is deciding to go into ministry, choosing a profession, choosing where to live, or who to love, we hope for God to give us the green light or at least a sign on which path to take, but most of the time it takes blind faith (Hebrews 11:1) that God will be with us in whatever results our choices bring and guide us in our decision-making through prayer. As Proverbs 3:5-6 encourages, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” Any direction we take, God will still be with us.



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Michelle is currently a senior at University of Central Florida majoring in communication and writing with a minor in marketing. When she isn't studying, she is a leader in her college ministry InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She has a passion for writing about pop culture and Christianity. She enjoys watching Netflix, spending time with friends, family and her dog Pepper, and singing along to her favorites songs. Michelle can be reached at msaldivar94@gmail.com.



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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 because 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