

new identity

God in focus. World in scope.

MAGAZINE

THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

SEEING THE
WORLD
ILLUMINATED
BY LOVE

SPREADING A LITTLE KINDNESS

HOW SMALL
GESTURES OF
LOVE CAN HAVE
A BIG IMPACT

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

TRUSTING
GOD WITH A
DIFFERENT PLAN



NEW IDENTITY MAGAZINE.COM

*Allowing God
To Make The
Most of You
pg. 38*

contents

DEPARTMENTS

Issue 25



06

GROW

Foundation

6 The Light of Christ

Seeing the world illuminated
by love

by Steven Butwell

Growth & Maturity

12 Come and Follow Me

What does discipleship mean?
by Nicholas Sowell

Jargon

16 Prodigal

by Ramon Mayo



18

CONNECT

Community

18 Spreading A Little Kindness

How small gestures of love
can have a big impact

by Sarah Mariano

Life Together

22 Color-Coded Culture A Guideline to Grace in Parenting

by Aaron D. Conley

God Talk

26 Loving God by Loving Others

Those who are the hardest to
love are often the ones that
need it the most

by Matthew Hamilton



32

LIVE

Give Back

30 Christmas SPIRIT Foundation

Bringing the spirit of Christmas
to military personnel and their
families

by Veronica Felipe

Careers & Callings

32 When Things Go Wrong

Trusting God with a Different
Plan

by Lindsey A. Frederick

Culture & Creativity

38 Are Christians Nice People or New People?

Allowing God to make the most
of us inside and out

by Délice Williams



...though your sins are like scarlet, they
shall be as white as snow...

Isaiah 1:18

There is something so beautiful and refreshing about a winter snowstorm. All the imperfections of a dried and dormant world are covered up by tiny incredibly detailed ice crystals. This blanket, pure and blindingly white, shows us a lovely picture of the way Jesus has covered our sins by his grace, goodness and sacrifice on the cross.

In 1 John 3:2-3 it says, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.” Jesus’ gift to us is a fresh start and a new beginning as children of God. Through him we are renewed to become more beautiful and complete people by his grace and forgiveness. This layer of purity that he covers us with is how God always sees us; it never melts away. Underneath the snow we change shape, mature, and grow, awaiting the spring when Jesus returns. Beneath the snow our true selves will be waiting to emerge in a state of perfection before our amazing God.

You’ve heard it said before that our journey as Christians is a lifelong process. We can’t reach our full potential without Christ. We can only grow towards our full potential through worship, prayer, community, learning and the giving of ourselves to God’s purposes and callings. During this journey it helps to be motivated by the journeys of others, and that’s what I find most fulfilling about the articles in this issue. Each one, such as “The Light of Christ,” “Spreading A Little Kindness” and “Are Christians Nice People or New People?” is an exploration, a dialogue or conversation about what it means to live as a Christian and live out what the Bible unfolds to us. I know I am encouraged by others and I hope through the great articles in this issue, you can be too.

Cheers!

Cailin

CAILIN BRIODY HENSON
Editor-in-Chief

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A La Carte Faith

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

THE
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ONE DJ WANTS TO BRING GOD
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Breaking Bread &
Breaking Barriers
OVERCOMING CULTURAL
DIFFERENCES

PLUS:

WHAT IS PRAYER?
SURFING AND SERVING IN PANAMA
HOW GOD CHANGES YOUR BRAIN
INSIGHTS FROM A CHRISTIAN VEGETARIAN

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE
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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.

Tip

Referencing The Bible:

There are many Bible translations out there. Just a few are the New International Version, The Message, and the New Living Translation. You'll see these referenced as NIV, NLT, The Message etc. When we reference a Bible verse, such as John 3:16, 'John' is the book in the Bible. There are 66 books total. 3 is the chapter in the book and 16 is the verse in the chapter.

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The Light of Christ

Seeing the world illuminated by love

by Steven Butwell

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I was afraid of the dark as a kid. But when the light came on and I could see again, I wasn't afraid any more. That is what Jesus did for this world. Where it was once consumed by darkness, Jesus flooded it with light. With Jesus as the light in our lives, we can see and not be afraid.

Light Has A Source

In John 8:12 (ESV), Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This truth can challenge us or cause confusion because it implies that without Jesus, we are in the dark. But we are in darkness without Jesus, in a world where people constantly stumble over their own misunderstanding. Unless we accept the light of life, who is Jesus, we will continue to wander in the darkness, clutching to whatever we can, trying to navigate for ourselves.

I remember what it was like to walk in darkness. Before I was a Christian, a friend took me to church. At the end of the sermon, I wanted to punch the pastor. He called me out on my sins, and I didn't like being told I was living a life of rebellion. I saw drunkenness and womanizing as normal. I didn't think I was in need of saving or change. But I was being drawn to God just as Jesus promised: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

Unknown to me at the time, Jesus was leading me to a place of surrender.

After many more churchless Sundays, God finally got my attention on Friday, March 12, 2004, when I met Jesus face to face in a vision. I was bathed in a light that only Jesus could bestow, exposing how dark and fruitless my life had been. I learned that Jesus was lifted up on that cross for me, dying, being buried, rising again, and ascending to heaven. Then he commissioned me with the task of doing his work here on earth, of bringing others into relationship with him.

Light Is A Guide

Accepting Jesus into our hearts is not the end of our journey; it is the beginning of the path to becoming more like Christ. When we look at our hearts, thoughts, and surroundings, Jesus reveals just how dark the world's ways really are. When we turn to Jesus, he gives us his light and shows us his way. Having Jesus' "light of life" means having his love and guidance. Sometimes his way looks confusing or strange, but it is always the best way to travel. God's plans for us are good, "plans to prosper and not to harm, plans for a hope and for a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

People with unbelieving hearts only seek after what prospers them. Apart from Jesus, we set in motion lives filled with harm, with no hope and no future. A person can only have hope and a future when life

is lived out for Christ. We get light through reading the Bible, prayer, and fellowship with other Christians. This light of life can be obtained through an open line of communication with the one who gives it—Jesus. Apart from him, life can appear meaningless. Our purpose in life is to glorify God with who we are and what we have.

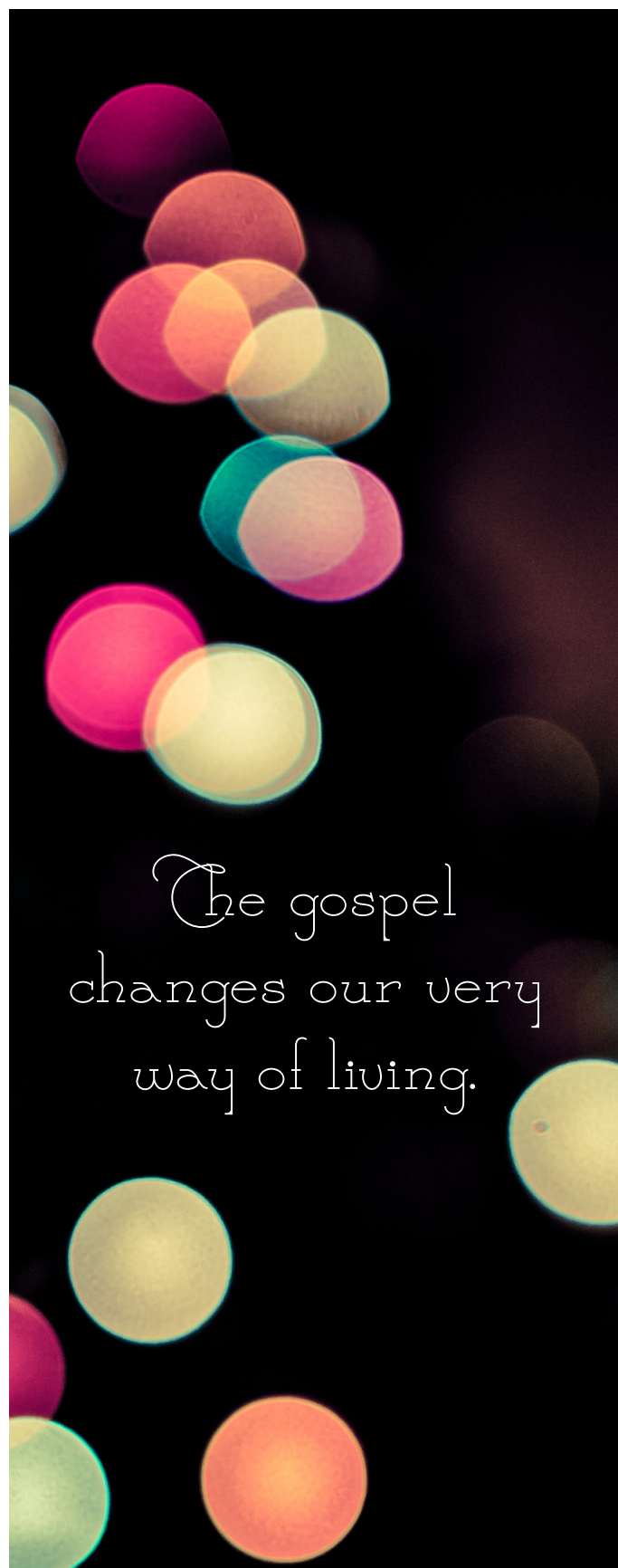
Light Is A Gift

The choice to either accept or reject the gift offered by Jesus is ours. No one can make the decision for us, not even God. He draws us to him, but he doesn't force us to choose him. Jesus says:

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God" (John 3:17-21 ESV).

Jesus is the only way to God (John 14:6), and knowing Jesus is eternal life (John 17:3). Jesus himself embodied the truth of who God is. He showed us the life that God desires for us all, completely relying on and surrendered to God our Father. The Bible teaches that no person seeks after God in their own power, not one (Romans 3:23). It is only by God drawing us to himself (John 12:32) that we will see that Jesus truly is who he says he is, the Savior of the world.

Even while people were rebelling and rejecting God, Jesus died for us (Romans 5:8). This shows us that God loves humanity so much that he gave his only son so that when we believe in Jesus, we won't die but will have everlasting life (John 3:16). It is with our heart that we believe in Jesus, and with our mouth that we confess that he is truly God (Romans 10:9).



Light Has A Purpose

We get light through
reading the Bible,
prayer, and fellowship
with other Christians.

Salvation is a gift we get through relationship with Jesus, a gift that God wants to bestow on all people. Two thousand years ago, when asked by people what they should do to please God, Jesus answered, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:29, ESV). Jesus gives us the same answer today: believe in me, know me, love me as I love you. There is no additional work to be done—no specific prayer to pray, no amount of money to give, no number of people to feed—to gain God’s gift of grace.

We experience God’s grace by having a genuine relationship with his son, Jesus, and our acts are the direct result of an authentic faith. The apostle John wrote:

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 (1 John 3:17-18).

If our hearts have been surrendered to Jesus, with God’s love abiding in us, we will begin diligently seeking opportunities to speak of his faithfulness and show it in generosity as well.

For those who accept him, Jesus says:

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

People who surrender their lives to Christ carry the message of the gospel in their words and actions.

The gospel changes our very way of living. Our everyday conversations spark interest in other people, building their interest in the gospel. Our love for Christ should not be hidden to a watching world.

As a lamp makes plain the layout of a room, so a heart surrendered to Jesus gives the light of life to others we come in contact with. The glory is no longer for us, as it once was; now the glory is for God because he shows himself through our Christ-lit actions.

As a city on a hill is seen from afar, so is a life that is lived for Jesus. Our deeds are done not for ourselves, but for the glory of our Father who is in heaven.

A light doesn’t decide to start shining, giving light to all who are in the room; someone has to start the process. Jesus started the process in my life by shedding light on the temptations that consumed me. Jesus gives us a stern command:

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15-17, ESV).

We must love light more than darkness.

Things in this world seek to draw our attention away from Jesus, the one who died so we would all come to be reconciled with God. If we make the willing choice to reject the light that Jesus promises to bring into our lives, we choose to remain in the darkness with our desires rooted in pride and our choices based on fear. With faith and the help of a loving God, our actions and choices will spread the light and message of the gospel, rather than conceal it. Those who do not have his light may search for it, and those who do have it should not hide it, so those who search can see.

In John 9, a man who is blind from birth is healed of his blindness and is interrogated by the Pharisees, a group of Jewish elders. They ask how Jesus could have healed him since they suspect Jesus is a sinner and not from God. The man who was born blind responds, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!" (John 9:25, ESV)

At Christmas, light is a special reminder. People put up tiny lights on their eaves and pine trees to illuminate the darkness and celebrate the birth of humankind's savior, Jesus, who offers light to everyone (John 1:9). "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Jesus, our sign from God, the baby born in a manger (Luke 2:12), born to speak of God, live for God and die for God, to reclaim what he had lost, relationship with his precious people. Christ's birth painfully reminds us of what God had to do to draw us back into a reconciled, perfect relationship with himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, and, at the same time, reminds us of the light and hope Christ offers to the world. 🕊

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STEVEN BUTWELL

As a pastor and missionary, Steven is zealous to share the gospel of Jesus to anyone and everyone he sees or knows. Steven is a former atheist who encountered Jesus face to face at age 19 in a vision. Since meeting Jesus, Steven has devoted his life to serving him. Steven's passions include: being a husband to his lovely wife Jamie, reading the Bible, writing, traveling, and public speaking.

COME AND FOLLOW ME

What does discipleship
mean?

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When I became a Christian, I didn't know what discipleship was, and in all honesty, years after giving my heart to the Lord, I still didn't. After five years as a follower of Jesus, the senior pastor of my church took me under his wing. He was an example of a mature Christian in my life, and he was intentional about giving me time, allowing me to ask questions, and helping me make good decisions. This is an example of discipleship in our culture. But what is discipleship?

Understanding the concept of discipleship starts with knowing the definition of a disciple. A disciple is a follower, one who accepts the views and beliefs of another and assists in spreading them; in the Christian community, that means believing and communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is a relationship in which one person passes beliefs on to another; Christian discipleship is believing the message of Christ, learning to be more like Christ, and teaching others to do the same.

The passage this is based on is usually called "The Great Commission", and it's the cornerstone verse regarding discipleship:

"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples

to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20, ESV).

This is what Jesus told his disciples: to spread his message to the whole world and teach everyone in the way he had instructed them. The message was for the people and to the people, and the way it would be spread was through them. Jesus trained them in the way he did ministry, the way he taught, and the way he followed his Father.

Ray Vander Laan, an expert in ancient Jewish culture, explains that children started biblical studies at a young age in Jesus' day, studying and memorizing the Torah, or the first five books of the Bible. Some graduated and went on to memorize the Old Testament, all 39 books. Then a chosen few were selected to essentially train to be rabbis. The children that weren't chosen would usually join the family business.

So when Jesus comes on the scene and goes to choose his disciples, they're all already in the family business... which means they didn't make the cut. In his choice of disciples he shows us a very important truth: he doesn't care whether they're haves or have-nots; his requirement is that they are willing to say "yes" and follow him.

JESUS DOESN'T CARE WHETHER WE'RE HAVES OR HAVE-NOTS; HIS REQUIREMENT IS THAT WE ARE WILLING TO SAY "YES" AND FOLLOW HIM.

Every following moment with the twelve disciples is simply Jesus teaching them to do what he did, how he did it, and how to reproduce it. He wanted the disciples to have a commitment to spreading the gospel in the same way he did, and he wanted them to know how to do it—how to teach it, demonstrate it, and show others how to live out a successful life as a believer. Today we still benefit from allowing others to teach us and show us how to walk out our faith.

If you think of a brick's position in a wall, it's a lot like discipleship. The brick is positioned with two bricks below it and two bricks above it. Like a brick in a wall, a disciple should always have people below them, sharing their strength and experience. Likewise, we should always be supporting other people and investing in their growth.

Jesus' model was simple: disciple people who disciple people who disciple people. The apostle Paul followed his example and discipled Timothy, then placed him as pastor over a local church, reminding him of the structure that Jesus established for creating other disciples: In Ephesians 4, Paul writes to the church in Ephesus instructing them in discipleship.

As you grow in Christ, questions and challenges come up, and it's helpful to have prayer and wise counsel. Being discipled begins with having a model who can show you what more mature Christianity looks like. When you trust someone to lead you, you gain access to ideas you've never considered, you find tools that transform your relationship with God, you go to places you've never been. As Christians, our job is to follow and obey Jesus, it's also important to learn from other believers who have more knowledge, experience and wisdom in the Christian faith.

Trusting someone to disciple you doesn't mean following them without question. We measure everything against the example of Scripture and discern through prayer. Pastor or not, anyone can give poor advice. People have found themselves in bad places by blindly and "obediently" following someone. A mentor isn't someone that tells you what to do, but hopefully a person who shows you how to do things for yourself, how to think for yourself and ultimately how to make decisions independently of them. In much the same way, Jesus taught his disciples and then trusted them to continue his ministry.

My first mentor was one I sought out myself. My college roommate had a mentor that he was always able to go to when he needed help, or support, or advice in decision-making. I recognized my need for the same thing. My roommate's mentor eventually became my mentor too.

At my first meeting with my mentor, I was nervous and uncertain. I grabbed a coffee and sat with this man for what can only be described as a spiritual surgery, splitting me open and going straight for the heart. Here was this man I didn't know, asking me penetrating questions about my life, how my heart was in this area and that area. Trying to be transparent with someone that I didn't know was terrifying.


But my mentor did something no one else was brave enough to do. He didn't beat around the shallow-talk bush; instead he got real with me. As we continued with the discipling relationship, he showed me areas where I needed to grow, he held me accountable in my purity, and, when times were tough, he was there to speak the truths of God. Even now when times are tough or I need wisdom in decision-making, or someone to celebrate testimonies with me, that's my guy. That's my mentor. That's my discipler.

Now, as an associate pastor, I disciple young men too. I make them a priority, meeting with them regularly and doing my best to make myself available when they need me. I've taught them how to ask questions and seek wisdom. My belief is that you're ready to begin discipling someone else when you're ready to be vulnerable, communicative, transparent, and willing to share your breakthroughs, successes and failures with others.

There's no magic formula for finding a spiritual father or mother (aka "mentor" or "discipler"). Look for a man or woman of God who is where you hope to be some day or who has had breakthroughs in the areas you want to pursue, because, ultimately, those are the people who can help get you there. We have a saying in my church: If you want to be

AS YOU GROW IN CHRIST, QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES COME UP, AND IT'S HELPFUL TO HAVE PRAYER AND WISE COUNSEL.

a giant killer, hang around giant killers. Seek those people out, ask for their help, and draw out the wisdom they carry. As you grow, you'll realize that you have wisdom that other people want as well, gifts and experiences to share that no one else has.

The Lord always wants to help grow you, prosper you, and mature you in your walk. Everyone benefits from having someone speak into their life, whether they're three or ninety-three. Are you willing to say yes? 



NICHOLAS SOWELL

Nicholas has been involved in full time ministry since age 16. He has served as a lay minister, youth pastor, Christian radio DJ, Christian music production company owner, surf missionary, and now young adults pastor. Nicholas has used his love for writing to inspire, educate, and most importantly: further the kingdom of God. Now married and living in Austin, Texas.



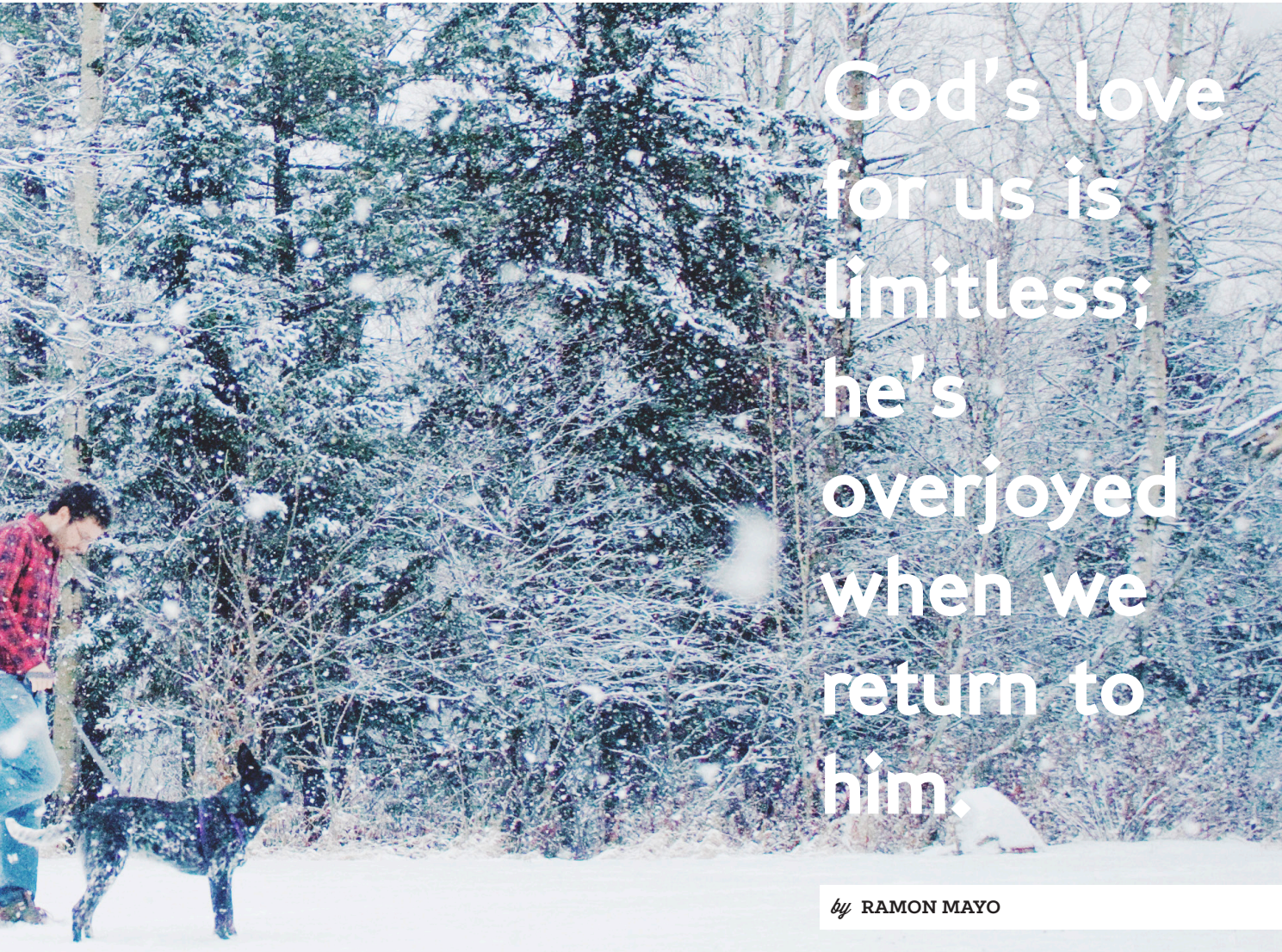
PRODIGAL

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Prodigal is a foreign word to our ears. It means “overwhelmingly wasteful.” If you have ever been in church circles, the word may conjure up an image of a young man in tattered rags. “Prodigal” may also bring to mind a person who has gone astray from faith in God, one who for whatever reason is no longer following Jesus. This is because the word is associated with a story Jesus told in **Luke 15:11-32**.

The story of “The Prodigal Son” is about a young man who basically disses his father by asking for his inheritance early. By doing this, he was saying, in so many words, that he wished his father were dead.


If that wasn't enough of an insult, the son goes to a distant country and spends all of his father's money on prostitutes and wild living. His whole inheritance—the one he got while his father was still alive—was spent on partying and sowing his wild oats. But disaster soon strikes. A famine lays waste to the land. The son has no food and no money, and he ends up in what was at the time an embarrassing occupation: he works as a hired hand feeding pigs. Soon the son has a flash of inspiration and decides to return home in the hopes of becoming one of his father's servants. As the boy gets close to home, his father sees him coming and runs to greet his son. Instead of scolding him, he wraps him in a loving embrace and kisses him. The father calls for a celebration and gives his son the best robe and puts a



God's love
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him.

by **RAMON MAYO**

ring on his finger. He tells his servants to kill the fattest calf. As far as the father is concerned, nothing is too much for this occasion. His son has returned home! Not only is this a story about a wasteful and reckless son, this story is also about a wasteful and reckless father. The father runs to the son and lavishes his love on him. Even though the son has wasted his inheritance and flushed his life down the drain, the father embraces him. His son has returned home, and it is time to celebrate. The best robe, the fattest calf, and the expensive ring show that the father sees this as a time to pull out all the stops. The love that the father shows might be offensive to those who hear this story for the first time. After all, isn't he being even more reckless than his son? The father is the prodigal, and his heart

mirrors the heart of our prodigal God. God's love for us is limitless; he's overjoyed when we return to him. This is how much he wants relationship with us. God pulled out all the stops in sending Jesus to die for us, and when we return to him, there is a party in heaven. 



RAMON MAYO

Ramon Mayo is an author and speaker. He resides in Matteson, IL 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). Also check out his blog at [RamonMayo.com](https://www.RamonMayo.com)



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SPREADING A LITTLE KINDNESS

How small gestures of love
can have a big impact

by Sarah Mariano

My first year of college, I was stressed. I didn't know how I was going to afford tuition, I didn't have a job lined up, and I didn't have any clue how I would have time to get it all done. I went grocery shopping with a few people I had met recently, and the whole time I was filled with worry about how I was going to get a job and how much of my savings I had already spent. I got to the checkout, and my friend, whom I had known maybe three weeks, simply said, "I got it." This moment was small, but I was reminded that in everything God is my provider. He said, "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?" (Matt. 6:25, ESV) God used someone's simple gesture as a powerful way of communicating truth when I needed it most. The great part is that God wants to use all of us to encourage other people using what he has given us!

Providing for people financially is one way of sharing God's love, but many ways don't involve money: giving a note of encouragement, baking cookies, cleaning a kitchen, or spending time with someone. People can be affected by the simplest gestures, and this comes from the fact that we were created for community and for

mutual love and service for one another. (Gal. 5:13) As we approach the holiday season and remember things we are grateful for, let's also celebrate the gift of community by showing one another love and gratitude in gestures like these.

Maybe part of the battle is that you want to bless people in your community, but you don't know what to give. I start by asking myself what I have. Do I have a free Saturday I could use to spend time with that person? Do I have some extra money I could use to buy a friend a latte? Or do I have a moment to send a text? Any of these gestures could make someone feel appreciated. Next I like to think about what that person would most like. What can I offer that this person would appreciate? For someone who has a lot on their plate, offering to help with an errand may be better than inviting them to take off a whole afternoon to play Ultimate Frisbee with you. Thinking of ways to meet their needs might be the most meaningful gift.


People may notice the little acts of service, the small offerings made in everyday encounters, or the quiet sacrifices amidst the mundane struggle of the present. An act of service can be momentous, but it can also easily be forgotten. There may not be accolades or even notice. We act in service of God and expect no reward except his pleasure.

When Jesus ministered around Judah, there were people who wanted religious recognition. They prayed

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FOR COMMUNITY AND FOR MUTUAL LOVE
AND SERVICE FOR ONE ANOTHER.

loudly on street corners and performed religious rites before crowds, not for mutual edification or to encourage others in faith but for selfish promotion. Jesus condemned this pretension. He instructed his followers to pray without seeking attention: “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward” (Matt. 6:5, ESV). This applies to all our actions too. Jesus calls us to a life of humility, a desire for God’s glory rather than our own. In the next verse, Jesus goes on to say, “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6, ESV).

We are to act quietly, seeking only the approval of God, our Father, not the approval of others. Validation from others is only an added blessing that must not rule us or distract us from our true motivation. God is our ultimate judge, our ultimate blessing, and our ultimate source of identity. This holiday season, the motivation to give can be the fact that we have been given so much. God, who supplies all of our needs and

gives his love abundantly, came to earth in the form of a man; he suffered and died, bearing the weight of our sins, so that we could have eternal life with him. The Father calls us to himself knowing that we will never have anything to offer that compares with the greatness of his love. The Lord gave to us without expecting anything in return because everything we have is already his. It is with this same attitude that we give to those around us. We cannot expect anything in return because our gift is motivated by love and not personal gain. God has given us everything we need, and validation from others isn’t necessary to satisfy our desire for love. We give because we have received, and this not of our own power but of Christ in us. 



SARAH MARIANO

Sarah Mariano is an English major at Biola University. She seeks to glorify God by communicating his truths through writing. She also leads worship and works in junior high ministries, hoping to let the Spirit work through her to create disciples. Her interests include baking, tea, good books, and spending time with her family.

A large, artistic photograph of two children playing in a field at sunset. The child on the left is a girl with a ponytail, and the child on the right is a boy holding a bat and a ball. The background is a warm, orange-hued sky, and the foreground is a dark, silhouetted field.

COLOR-CODED CULTURE

A Guideline to Grace in Parenting

by Aaron D. Conley

Photos © Brett Davies | Flickr (CC)

Being a parent in the 21st century is an act of faith. My wife and I are raising two young boys, ages 4 and 8. As our boys grow, we become more and more aware of the enormous responsibility we have to teach them to be human persons. The task requires us to learn for ourselves what it means to be human, which often includes unlearning what the world has taught us and embracing the breadth of freedom Jesus offers.

One challenge before Christian parents today is unpacking gender identity and gender roles with our children from biblical perspectives. Sex and gender are often considered synonyms, but their distinctions are very important. A person's sex is determined by the biological presence or absence of chromosomes, reproductive organs, and genitalia. A person's gender refers to his or her sex but includes the behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that a culture associates with females or males.

Assigning pink to girls and blue to boys is common in American culture today, but pink was considered a masculine color in the 19th century. Then during the mid-20th century, in response to retail marketing efforts, pink became associated with femininity. When my wife was pregnant, well-meaning friends and family couldn't wait to find out whether the child was a girl or a boy, so that they could buy clothes in the "right"

color. Thus the process of gendering our kids starts before they even enter into the world.

What counts as masculine or feminine in the U.S. today might not be the same in other contexts. For example, men who wear skirts in the U.S. are violating cultural norms for masculine attire, but Turkana and Masai men in Kenya traditionally wear robe-like skirts. In another example, photographs of President Franklin Roosevelt as a baby in 1884 show him wearing a dress, fairly common for both boys and girls of the time until age 6 or 7. Much fluidity exists in the concepts of masculine and feminine depending on the time and place.

Our concept of what is gender appropriate is constantly changing, even though it may seem fixed. This recognition might give us pause in passages like 1 Timothy 2, where women are instructed not to wear pearls or braid their hair or teach men. Most believe these are examples of cultural conventions, and they reflect a specific time and place; others take a more literal interpretation, but there is risk of missing the gospel of God by taking these injunctions too literally without regard for cultural context. We must take both culture and context into consideration when reading Scripture, though how much is always up for debate.

Many of Jesus' stories and actions challenged cultural expectations. In John 4, Jesus' exchange with the woman at the well crosses gender boundaries.



We often get stuck in our roles and the divided world they create.

Historically tensions were high between Jews and Samaritans. While Jesus was speaking to a Samaritan woman, the disciples arrived on the scene. The disciples were shocked, not that he was talking to a Samaritan but that he was talking to a woman. Jesus validates the woman's personal worth and allows her to be the one to invite the Samaritan community to hear Jesus. Given the presence of believing women accounted in the book of Acts and in the Epistles, I assume that the disciples learned a lot from Jesus' example with this Samaritan woman.

In Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, he tells of a father who abandons his own cultural gender expectations of what it meant to be a proper patriarch by running to his son who is seen off in the distance. "...But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20, ESV). The appropriate cultural behavior of a man of his status and wealth in his society would not have been to act so undignified by running, yet the story reflects the type of affection and grace God has for us by breaking such gender and cultural expectations.

These examples alert us to the tensions that cultural assumptions can cause. If we come to Scripture and to our history today looking for reasons to support fixed gender roles, we may only see what we want to see and risk missing the counter-cultural imperatives upon

which the stories of God are based. Our challenge is to ask what we could be missing by uncritically adopting fixed gender roles. Do we hold so tightly to our concepts of maleness and femaleness that we miss the spirit of the gospel message?

Parenting By a Gospel of Grace

At its most fundamental level, the gospel is about a God who pursues us, embraces us, and accepts us though we are unworthy of such grace (Acts 15:11, Eph. 2:8, Jas. 4:6). God's pursuit of us brings the Christian life meaning and hope. This gospel reminds me that I am valuable in the midst of the many difficulties faced in parenthood.

The call of the gospel is to pursue, embrace, and accept one another as Jesus has done to us. First and foremost, I am a father and a husband. Can I embrace my sons in love when they cross a boundary that I as a parent have set for them? My pride gives me pause in these pursuits, but the power of the gospel liberates me from my egocentric tendencies. I have experienced what it means to have grace given to me, and now I have the chance to help my family experience this too.

To extend grace is my primary role as a father and as a husband. To extend grace is my spouse's primary role as a mother and a wife. According to Galatians 3:28,

there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female in the movement of God towards humanity. We are all one in Christ. How can we live this grace-filled message? For my wife and me, it starts with how we speak to our children. We've trained ourselves to avoid assigning characteristics based on gender. For example, adults often tell girls that they are pretty and boys that they are smart before pointing out any other characteristic. When repeated over and over, we start to believe that girls are pretty and boys are smart and that the two characteristics are mutually exclusive. There is so much more to being human than can be expressed by "pretty" or "smart."

We often get stuck in our roles and the divided world they create. The fact that Paul needed to instruct the churches away from these points of division testifies to the fact that we have trouble living within the freedom that grace allows. In Galatians 3:3, Paul asks the Galatians if their faith, which started in the Spirit, is now too comfortable in the "flesh." The Greek word for flesh is "sarx," which could carry connotations of human striving, legal conventions, or even sinful desires. To the extent that we intentionally or unintentionally place our kids into rigid categories, we risk the kind of legalism (emphasis on strict rules instead of grace) that Paul warns against.

Jesus himself challenged gender roles in a variety of ways while reversing cultural expectations, all to point to the radicalness of the gospel of grace. If my sons come to identify firmly within the gender boundaries that our culture sets for maleness, then it is my role to help them remember that the Bible challenges cultural gender roles. Regardless of who they become, it is my role to pursue, embrace and accept my sons for who they are as children of God.

Parenting in this way is to live in the spaces in between. It is to be awkward because you may behave in ways that normative culture does not expect. My wife often pulls out woodworking tools to use with our boys, and I talk to my boys about the emotions I experience. We model human experiences so that they grow up knowing what it means to be fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps. 139:14). 🧠

At its most fundamental level, the gospel is about a God who pursues us, embraces us, and accepts us though we are unworthy of such grace.



AARON D. CONLEY

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Loving God by Loving Others

Those who are the hardest to love
are often the ones that need it the most

by Matthew Hamilton

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We use the word love frequently, often without thought. We say we love pizza from a certain pizzeria. We say we love a certain television show and take time out of our schedule to make sure we don't miss it. We often say we love a certain holiday, such as Christmas or Easter, but often care more about the celebration than the reason for celebrating. These are all situations where it is easy to love, mainly because the affection is directed toward an inanimate object or an abstract idea.

There are also situations where love is needed but not present. These situations are difficult because the person we should love might not seem to deserve it. And, even if we think that the receiver is deserving of love, the love might not be received. When we are called to love others, both Christians and non-Christians, the Bible does not give us loopholes to avoid loving those that we want to avoid.

One of the recurring themes in Jesus' teaching is love. He doesn't spend his time talking about loving things but, rather, about loving people.

Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another.

"Jesus doesn't spend his time talking about loving things but, rather, about loving people."

This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other. (John 13:34-35, The Message)

It is important to know that Jesus was setting a precedent here: identifying a group by love. Jesus offered a new community of purpose, one built on reaching out to one another and taking others into consideration first as opposed to militant government or religious law. During this time there were other

ways to be identified: by force (the Roman army) or by fear of breaking the law (religious leaders such as the Pharisees). These were the normal ways that groups imposed their ideas on others, and it was mostly against their own will. Jesus was offering something entirely new. He offered a community you could choose to be a part of, one that did not require taking, but conversely giving of yourself as an act of love.

The author of the books of John speaks often about how followers of Jesus should make love the highest priority. In fact, it is a matter of life and death. As John says, "The way we know we've been transferred from death to life is that we love our brothers and sisters. Anyone who doesn't love is as good as dead" (1 John 3:14, *The Message*). It becomes clear that, not only should Christians show love, it should be our defining characteristic.

It may be difficult at times to show love to our fellow Christians. Even with our shared devotion to Christ, we are the same fallible humans with the same tendency to inflict hurt, cause distrust, and show jealousy. It is only because of our devotion to God that we can rise above the worst parts of our nature. If our focus is on the love that God shares with us and that we share with each other, there is less time for the things that divide us. In many ways, it's much easier to love God. There are so many reasons to be grateful to the Creator, the one who provides current and eternal life. When we are commanded to direct the love that we have been given to other people, things become more difficult. John recognized this dilemma nearly 2000 years ago, and it still holds very true today:

If anyone boasts, "I love God," and goes right on hating his brother or sister, thinking nothing of it, he is a liar. If he won't love the person he can see, how can he love the God he can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both. (1 John 4:20-21, The Message)

It might be easier to love fellow Christians that we consider friends, but what about those who bring us trouble and pain? These are the people that are the hardest to love and often the ones that need it the most. Jesus knew that sharing love with these people

"If our focus is on the love that God shares with us and that we share with each other, there is less time for the things that divide us."

could yield the most reward:

You're familiar with the old written law, "Love your friend," and its unwritten companion, "Hate your enemy." I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. (Matthew 5:43-44, The Message)

While Jesus is sharing his love with us, he is calling on us to share it with others, thereby making others better when they know his love and us better when we share it. 🗣️



MATTHEW HAMILTON

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CHRISTMAS SPIRIT FOUNDATION

**Bringing the spirit of Christmas to
military personnel and their families**

by Veronica Felipe

It's hard to beat the smell of a fresh Christmas tree. The Christmas SPIRIT Foundation agrees and developed a plan for delivering fresh evergreens to deployed American soldiers and military families at home.

The Christmas SPIRIT Foundation's flagship program is Trees for Troops. Since its inception in 2005, CSF and FedEx have partnered to provide more than 139,000 fresh farm-grown trees. FedEx delivers trees to 69 military bases all over the world. Military families in 28 states have received doses of Christmas spirit from the Trees for Troops program.

Founded in 2005 as an offshoot of the National Christmas Tree Association, CSF works to advance the spirit of Christmas and encourage the use of natural Christmas trees in celebration. Trees for Troops is funded by CSF with charitable donations from individuals and businesses and through grants and sponsorships. Delivery services are donated by FedEx. Trees are donated by Christmas tree farmers and by the general public during CSF's annual Trees for Troops Weekend.

Get Involved: Trees for Troops Weekend

You can donate a tree from December 5-7, this year's Trees for Troops weekend. FedEx trailers will be parked at each of 27 participating farms, retail lots, and garden centers. The tree you donate will be loaded

on the truck and delivered the following week. In 2013, people purchased 7,216 trees for military families.

Each year, Trees for Troops has had to turn down nearly one thousand tree requests from military families. You can get involved in meeting this need:

Tell friends and groups about the
Trees for Troops weekend

Like Trees for Troops on Facebook,
Twitter, YouTube, and Pinterest

Suggest the CSF "tree matching"
program to your employer

Make an online contribution
directly to the organization

Purchase an item from CSF's online store to
help fundraise throughout the year

Participate in the online, buy-a-tree
campaign each year in November

Supporting the Christmas SPIRIT Foundation can help soldiers on home soil and abroad enjoy the spirit of Christmas with a freshly cut Christmas tree. Find out more at christmasspiritfoundation.org 



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When Things Go Wrong

Trusting God with a Different Plan

by Lindsey A. Frederick

Some things in life are not easy, like eating with chopsticks, doing math in your head, or cooking something other than microwave popcorn for dinner. Then there's the really hard stuff, like figuring out which college to attend or which career to choose. The Apostle Paul tries to encourage us in Romans by explaining that trials help us develop endurance. But I think this sounds like someone trying to convince me colonic cleansing is fun. It's tempting to believe God no longer cares about us when life gets hard or we feel like he's asking us to do something that doesn't make any sense. How are we supposed to trust him when things go wrong?

When Things Go Wrong

In high school, I dreamed of being a professional dancer. When the university of my choice didn't accept me into their dance program, I was crushed and naively assumed God didn't want me to dance. I enrolled in a different school without selecting a major—I was

waiting for God to tell me what to do. Toward the end of the school year, I still hadn't chosen a program. My adviser asked, "Why don't you at least consider a minor in dance?" I was so wrapped up in grieving the loss of my dream and being angry with God that it had never occurred to me.

In his New York Times bestseller *The Shack*, William P. Young writes, "Trust is the fruit of a relationship in which you know you are loved. Because you do not know that I love you, you cannot trust me." Do you love God enough to trust him? Or is it the other way around? If I'm being honest, I often don't. But it took me many years and the loss of several more dreams to realize this.

Faith Like Abraham

The story of Abraham was pivotal to my realization that I didn't love God enough to trust him. I was twenty-eight, and I had just broken up with my boyfriend and moved to a new city with few familiar faces. I was working a stressful job that paid pennies, and I was deeply depressed. My counselor called this dark period "the night shift" and encouraged me to

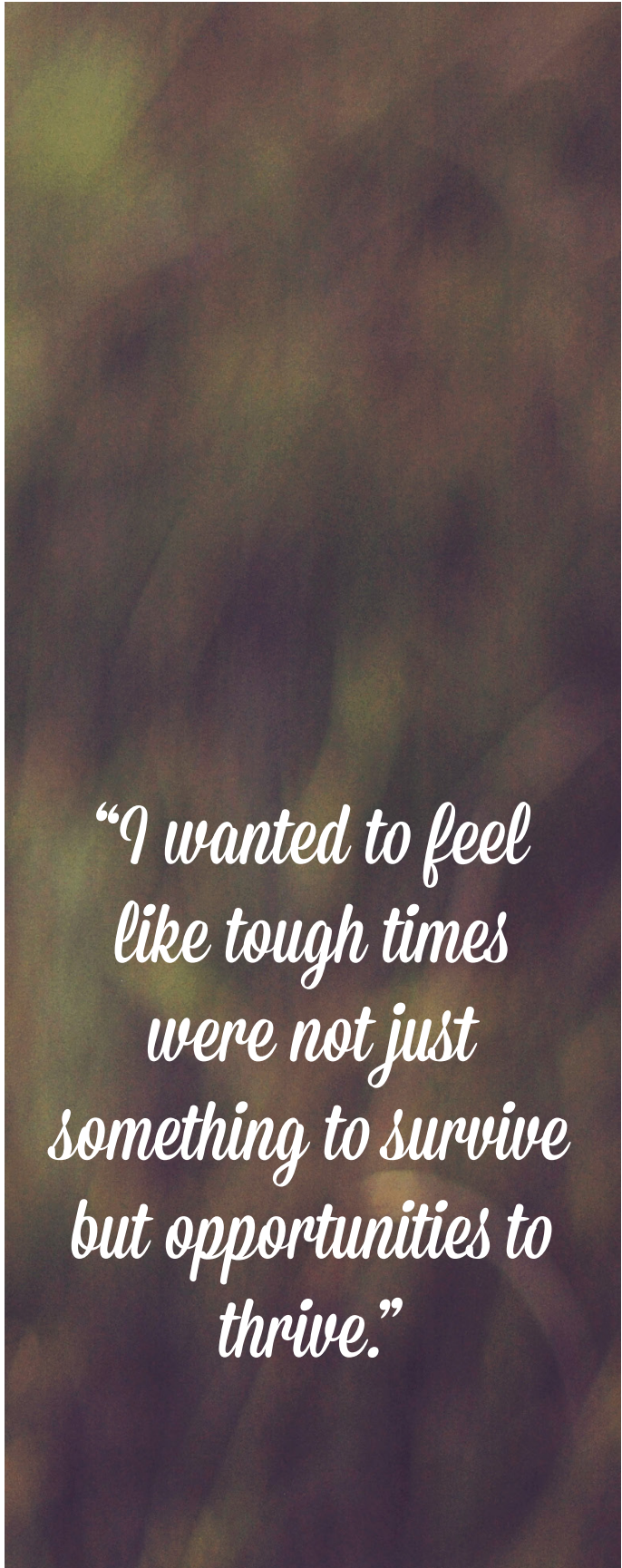
dig into the Bible. I reluctantly started with the story of Abraham and Isaac—a troubling and intriguing story. How could a loving and all-knowing God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son on an altar to prove his dedication? How could Abraham trust a God who asked him to do something that seemed to go against his commandments? How could his son Isaac go along with such a barbaric plan?

I imagined the anguish of this father taking his child on a death-march—a physically and emotionally tormenting, three-day mountain trek. It made my stomach curl, my blood boil. I shook a metaphorical fist at God, How could you be so egotistical? How could you give this man the thing he desired most and then ask him to destroy it? It reminded me of losing my dance dream.

But as I looked back at the qualities of Abraham, the following traits jump off the page: his quick obedience and unquestioning trust in God's good character. He believed God loved him. He believed God was trustworthy and benevolent. He believed God would provide an animal to sacrifice in place of his son. Just as Abraham was about to complete his mission, an angel intervened and, "Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means 'the Lord will provide'). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'" (Gen. 22:13–14, NLT).

The Bible doesn't reference Isaac's thought process during this excursion, but I noticed he didn't question his father. He only asked "where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" Whether this was a question of faith or a question of naiveté, it is clear that Isaac trusted his father in the same way Abraham trusted God. I believe because Abraham's faith was so influential that Isaac, too, grew to believe in God's absolute goodness.

I wanted faith like Abraham's. I wanted to love God so much that I never questioned him about my losses or trials. I wanted to believe he didn't waste my pain. I wanted to feel like tough times were not just something to survive but opportunities to thrive.



*"I wanted to feel
like tough times
were not just
something to survive
but opportunities to
thrive."*

Thriving, Not Surviving

I poked around the Bible more and found additional examples of God's people thriving in difficulty. David, a shepherd boy, took down a giant with only a sling and rock. Esther, a Jewish orphan, saved her people from extermination. Joseph, a cocky boy with a head full of dreams, saved thousands from famine. Each man and woman faced unimaginable difficulty, yet came through as their best self: courageous, selfless, humble, grateful, and more confident that God cares and provides for his people. God was on their side and had a greater purpose for their lives.

Plan B

What I didn't understand when I was seventeen was that God didn't say no to my dance dream; he just had a different purpose for it. Proverbs 16:9 says, "We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps" (NLT). I now believe dance is a gift to enjoy, rather than a skill to rely on to make a living. Each trial teaches me that God has an awesome habit of showing up, and that it's important to love him more than I love my plans. 🎧



LINDSEY A. FREDERICK

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“Each man and woman [I read about] faced unimaginable difficulty, yet came through as their best self: courageous, selfless, humble, grateful, and more confident that God cares and provides for his people.”

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REDEEMING THE HEART OF HIP HOP
EARTHBOUND: STEWARDSHIP OF THE PLANET



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ARE CHRISTIANS NICE PEOPLE OR NEW PEOPLE?

Allowing God to make the
most of us inside and out

by DÉLICE WILLIAMS

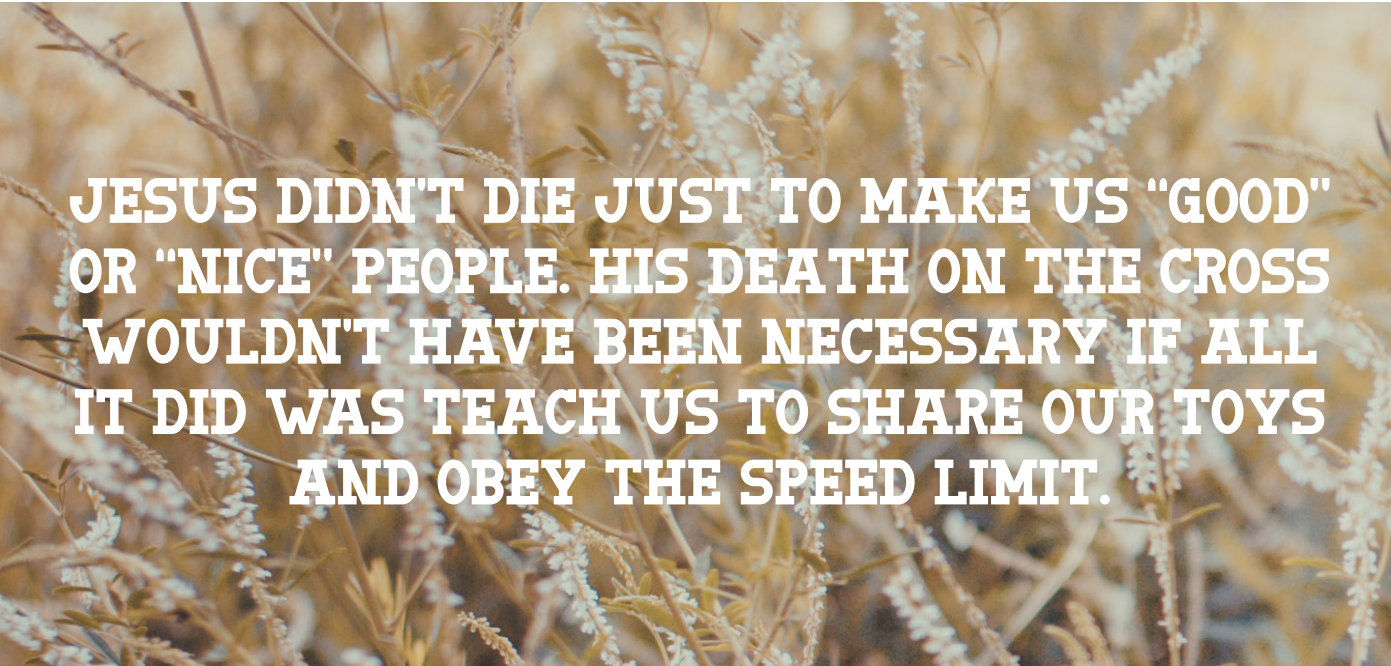
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I'm a huge fan of makeovers. I could spend hours watching rooms, houses, and people being rehabbed, dressed up, spruced up, or slimmed down. My dream cable TV station would be The Makeover Channel, featuring all makeovers all the time. I'd binge watch past episodes of What Not to Wear, The Biggest Loser, and Extreme Makeover (home and body editions). Looking at "Before" and "After" photos leaves me in awe of the vision and skill it takes to bring about that kind of change.

This makeover fascination is also a spiritual thing. In my heart and life, I feel the need for change. That feeling stays with me despite the fact that, like a lot of people who allow themselves to be labeled Christian, I'm probably doing OK on the outside: I read the Bible and go to church (even on Wednesdays). I respect the law, give to charity, pay my bills, and say grace before dinner. I'm "nice" to most people most of the time. If there were a club for "nice" people, I think I could make a reasonable case for membership. But in spite of this, my sense of a need for a spiritual makeover remains. Niceness doesn't seem to be enough. When I think about it, niceness shouldn't be enough for any Christian.

A lingering dissatisfaction with merely outward good behavior can be a very positive thing for those who follow Christ. That's because discontent with just being



JESUS DIDN'T DIE JUST TO MAKE US "GOOD" OR "NICE" PEOPLE. HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN NECESSARY IF ALL IT DID WAS TEACH US TO SHARE OUR TOYS AND OBEY THE SPEED LIMIT.

nice can point us to a more important truth, namely that Christians are not just people who manage to use good manners and stay on the right side of the law. Rather, Christians are people who are being transformed from the inside out in their thoughts, attitudes, desires, and instincts, not just in their actions. When we accept that Jesus Christ died on the cross to take the penalty for our sin, we begin a journey in which not only are our words and actions changed to reflect God's love and will, but our motivations for those words and actions begin to change as well. That happens as we allow Scripture, prayer, and biblical teaching to show us the truth about God and ourselves and to strengthen us to make right decisions. II Corinthians 5:17 puts it this way: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (ESV). "New creations" aren't just nice people who do the right things when other people are around. New creations have different attitudes and motivations and different priorities that align increasingly with God's priorities. To experience that newness, we have to pay attention to our inner character.

The changes from old self to new Christian self don't happen instantly. New Christians don't typically wake up one morning overflowing with peace, love,

and joy in their hearts, suddenly capable of infinite patience. Fear and guilt and selfishness don't disappear overnight. Just as it takes time for a seed to grow into a tree, it also takes time for our new spiritual selves to grow and bear fruit. That fruit comes in the form of kinder, more truthful words; greater gratitude for blessings; and increased patience with ourselves, others, and God. Greater maturity moves us toward more actions in loving service to God and other people, and we lose taste for things that dishonor God: songs that advocate violence, jokes that degrade other people. Thankfully these changes can and do happen. As we pray, read Scripture, allow godly believers to influence us, and obey God's direction more and more, our character comes to reflect Jesus' character and the qualities described in I Corinthians 13, Galatians 5:22-23 and others. Just as Jesus loved God the Father and did everything according to God's will (John 15:9), as we grow to love God more, we desire to demonstrate that love through our obedient actions. In a sense we do become nicer, but this niceness is rooted in our character and values, not just in our behavior.


As the process of change continues, we sometimes hit bumps in the road. We do or say something sinful, we have trouble forgiving someone or giving up a destructive habit, or we lash out at someone and

damage a relationship. In other words, we come up against our shortcomings. The Apostle Paul, a giant in the Christian faith, laments in Romans 7:13-25 that despite his new nature, he struggled with sin. But Paul also understood that that struggle is not a losing battle and that God provides ways for us to recover and get back on track after we mess up. If our struggle does lead to failure, God assures us of forgiveness and guidance when we admit our wrong and ask for help (1 Jn 1:9). Failures can even help remind us that the process of revealing our new natures through our attitudes and actions (II Cor 5:17) is just that—a process. It happens over time.

Another important truth: Jesus didn't die just to make us "good" or "nice" people. His death on the cross wouldn't have been necessary if all it did was teach us to share our toys and obey the speed limit. A strong will, positive reinforcement, or even the threat of negative consequences could bring lots of people into line—Christians and non-Christians alike. Jesus died to restore our relationship with God. Sin had broken that relationship. In taking the punishment that we deserved for our sin, Jesus made it possible for that relationship to be restored. If we reduce our Christianity to mere good behavior, we miss this essential truth. The beautiful thing is that as a result of that restoration of our relationship with God, we can begin the process of transformation of our hearts and minds into one that reflects God's character. That's what God intended for us from the beginning (Gen 1:26-27), and it's a key aspect of Christian joy. God's original design for us was perfect, and it would have meant perfection and joy for humans. Sin got in the way of that design. Thankfully, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and resurrection from the dead paid for that sin. Through that death and resurrection, Jesus opened the way for us to be what we were meant to be and to experience that joy that sin would've stolen from us.

Good behavior clearly has value. Generally speaking, schools, governments, and highways run more smoothly when people obey laws, show courtesy, and respect authority figures. But following Christ means more than following the rules, and merely following the rules won't restore a broken relationship with a God who is both loving and holy. Only Christ can restore

EVEN AS WE STRIVE TO LIVE LIVES THAT HONOR OUR LOVING GOD, WE CAN'T BE CONTENT WITH MERE NICENESS.

that relationship. Only God can transform us into the person that he intended us to be. Even as we strive to live lives that honor our loving God, we can't be content with mere niceness. Our hearts and attitudes have to change as well, and that begins when we allow God to use Scripture and other means to transform us from the inside out. But we don't have to beat ourselves up for not changing fast enough either. God is working on us. Yes, we have a role and responsibility in the process: pursuing transformation through prayer, Bible study, and gathering with other believers to worship (Heb 10:25). But ultimately God does the work. He arranges our lives to take us in the right direction. He reshapes our character. We can trust God as our good and wise Creator to bring about beautiful transformation in the loving, patient way. He is our Master Designer, the only one with the wisdom and power to truly make us over into the inwardly beautiful creations we were intended to be. 



DÉLICE WILLIAMS

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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