

**(SHOW)**

*then*

**TELL)**

52 Illustrations for  
Believing and Living the Gospel



**ERIC MCKIDDIE**

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# **SHOW THEN TELL**

52 Illustrations for Believing and Living the Gospel

By Eric McKiddie

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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## INTRODUCTION

We have entered a time when pastors are telling the gospel more than ever. As the wave of gospel-centeredness spreads across churches, many preachers have been reenergized in their pulpit ministry, and their churches are being revitalized as a result. Perhaps that's you.

But for all the *telling* of the gospel that is going on, I have not seen as much growth in *showing* it. Gospel-centered preachers tend to be strong exegetically and theologically in their sermons, but not as strong illustratively and creatively. I don't mean to say that such preachers don't value illustrations, although sometimes that's the case, unfortunately. I simply mean that preachers more naturally geared toward theology and exegesis tend to be less geared toward illustrations and application. Perhaps that's you, too.

My goal for this book is help gospel-centered preachers *show* the gospel better, so that when they *tell* the gospel, it resonates in the hearts of their congregation all the more. I pray that souls are saved, too.

When was the last time you thought up a great idea for a sermon illustration? If you're like me, it was *not* while you were preparing your sermon. Illustration ideas have a way of interrupting our inner dialogue while we shave. They mock us by revealing themselves as we drive home from church after we have already preached the sermon. We think, *Ah! That would have been perfect!* as we thump the driving wheel with the bottom of our fist.

My aim for this little book is to provide you with quality sermon illustrations when you can actually use them: during your sermon prep. They cover various topics that appear throughout Scripture, so they should match with the themes of your sermons often.

The illustrations I have included are “plug and play” ready. You may decide to re-craft them a bit so they fit your preaching style, but I have done as much of the work for you as I can. I have written out the illustrations completely yet succinctly, and I conclude each one by relating it to the gospel. They are not meant to entertain your congregation – although some will. They are meant to point your listeners to Jesus.

I have not included any personal illustrations. What good would it do you to introduce your story with, “There once was a pastor who...”? The illustrations in this book come from nature, science, history, Hollywood, and other places. I have seen them capture imaginations in my ministry context, and I think you will experience that, too.

There are fifty-two illustrations in this book, one for each week of the year. Over the course of that time, I hope this book takes the creativity and connectivity of your sermons up a notch. May “all see your progress” (1 Tim. 4:15) in showing and telling how the message of the gospel speaks to every area of life.



# **I. THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS WORTH SACRIFICING A FORTUNE**

The biggest, most expensive pearl in the world is the pearl of Lao-Tzu. Shaped like a rugby ball, it is nine and half inches long, five and half inches in diameter, and weighs in at just over fourteen pounds. It is valued at \$93 million dollars.<sup>1</sup>

How it was discovered is quite a story.<sup>2</sup>

In 1934, pearl divers at work in the Philippines realized a member of the crew, youth named Etem, was missing. The divers eventually found the drowned boy underwater with his hand caught in a giant clam. The crew took the corpse, with his hand still clamped by the clam, to a Mohammedan chief, who served as the local public notary, to sign an affidavit absolving them of responsibility for his death. The notary, reminded of his own pearl diving days, now long past, asked if he could have the clam. The crew said yes.

When the chief cracked open the shell, he found the biggest pearl in the world embedded in a corner of the clam.

To be sure, it is not the most beautiful looking pearl in the world. It's wrinkly surface and oblong shape make it look more like the model of a brain that sits atop the skeleton hanging in the front corner of your high school science class. But its color is a pure lustrous white that glows with a reflective, satiny sheen.

The tribe of the divers was hosting an American named Wilburn Dowell Cobb. When Cobb heard what was discovered, he set off to meet the chief and see the pearl.

At first glance Cobb immediately recognized the value of the pearl and asked the chief how much he wanted for it. The chief replied, "I may not be a millionaire but I defy the richest man in the world today to show me a similar pearl. Please excuse my words, my friend, but the satisfaction of owning the largest of all pearls is to me worth more than mere money."<sup>3</sup>

The satisfaction the chief derived from possessing the pearl was enough for him to forgo a fortune. Jesus teaches us that the kingdom of God is like that. Being a part of God's kingdom gives joy and satisfaction like nothing else. It is worth giving up everything to enter it.

## **2. EXERTING EFFORT TOWARD OBEDIENCE**

A few years ago, there was a black and white Gatorade commercial<sup>4</sup> starring Peyton Manning and Derek Jeter. The entire commercial played in slow motion with the dramatic symphony piece "O Fortuna" playing in the background.

As the camera gradually zooms closer and closer to the athletes throughout the commercial, Gatorade-colored perspiration appears dripping down their foreheads. Bright yellow and bright orange standing out in the otherwise black and white footage. The commercial draws to a close with the tagline for the ad campaign: "Is it in

you?” The implication is that the Gatorade they drank off the field supplied their energy on the field.

Growing in obedience takes purposefully exerted effort. You have to break a spiritual sweat to obey God. But the effort we exert does not come from our own reserves of energy. The beads of spiritual sweat that run down our face have their source in the Gatorade of God’s power working in us.

### **3. HOW GOD GIVES YOU A NEW HEART**

There are two kinds of heart transplant operations.<sup>5</sup> The one you probably think of is called an orthotopic heart transplant, in which the failing heart of the patient is removed, and a new heart is inserted. The other, lesser-known, operation is called a heterotopic transplant. In this case the surgeon leaves the old heart in the patient and connects the new heart to it. This creates, in effect, a double heart.

Why would the surgeon leave the old heart in? There are two main reasons. One is that a new heart sometimes helps the old, sick heart to recover and heal. The second is that if the body rejects the new heart it can be removed without putting the patient at immediate risk.

When it comes to the heart transplant God performs in us, many want the second operation. We want our old heart left in there with our new heart. We want just enough of Christianity to help our heart get “better.” We want self-improvement, not a new self. But our sin-filled

hearts cannot get better. They are not sick, they are dead.

Others want a contingency plan in case Jesus shocks the system. You think, “If this ‘following Jesus’ thing doesn’t work out how I hope, I’ll go back to life the way it was.” You want an exit strategy. But true followers of Jesus don’t keep their eyes peeled for an escape route. Jesus said, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven” (Luke 9:62).

God only performs one kind of heart transplant. He removes the old, lifeless, callous heart, and inserts a new one that beats to the pulse of his Spirit. When your heart beats to that pulse you will live forever, and you will desire to live a brand new, godly life.

#### **4. THE POWER IT TAKES TO REVERSE YOUR LIFE**

In 2012, the winds of Hurricane Isaac were more powerful than the typical hurricane. So forceful were the winds that they caused the Mississippi River to flow almost twice as fast in the opposite direction for 24 hours.<sup>6</sup> The last time that happened was seven years earlier during Hurricane Katrina.

Perhaps there are areas of your life that have been flowing in sinful directions for a long time. Maybe you have done all you can to reverse the flow to no avail. You are left wondering how to change.

We all have areas of our life that need to be turned around. How can the flow be reversed? When the

powerful, sanctifying gusts of the Holy Spirit blow in those areas. He has the power to bring change to your life.

## **5. DON'T ADJUST THE GOSPEL TO SUIT A NEW GENERATION**

In 1985, Coca-Cola changed their age-old recipe in response to “The Pepsi Challenge,” the popular and successful marketing campaign.<sup>7</sup> “The Pepsi Challenge” was a taste test in which a volunteer took a sip of Pepsi, then a sip of Coca Cola, and then decided which tasted better. Pepsi – the underdog – won with a resounding frequency.

“The Pepsi Challenge” succeeded because it only gave volunteers a sip of each drink. Pepsi, being sweeter than Coca Cola, tasted better if a tiny amount was tried. So in order to keep up with Pepsi, Coca Cola replaced their original beverage with the sweeter drink known as New Coke.

The Coca Cola Company did not expect the outrage of their current customers. Loyal Coke drinkers, angered over the change, mailed complaint letters at the rate of 8,000 per day. Coca Cola soon switched back to their old recipe under the name Coca Cola Classic. They continued to dominate the carbonated beverage market because when you drink the whole can, Coca Cola Classic appealed to more people than Pepsi.

In every generation the gospel faces a “Pepsi Challenge”.

The gospel doesn't taste so good to the younger crowd at first sip, so pastors make adjustments to it in order to get more people to accept it. But that will not ensure that the age-old message reaches the next generation. The answer is not to change the gospel, but to give to the whole gospel. Put out the whole can of the gospel; give people more than a sip. People who listen to the whole message will be more likely to taste and see that the Lord is good.

## **6. WHAT MULTITASKING DOES TO YOUR SOUL**

Once considered the epitome of productivity, multitasking has been shown to decrease both the quality and quantity of one's work. Studies have revealed that the brain cannot focus on more than one activity at a time. So multitasking forces the brain to switch its focus from one thing to the next.

Then why do people do it? Researchers of the effects of multitasking<sup>8</sup> on the brain have discovered that the multitasker receives a boost of positive emotions while multitasking. In other words, multitasking feels great, even though it does not work great.

Just like our brains are not wired for multitasking, neither are our souls. We do spiritual multitasking when we treat church and Jesus as one more thing on the task list. School, soccer, dinner, church. And many who live this way feel great. They get so much done and fulfill their Christian duty.

Or so they think.

It actually reduces “spiritual productivity” because our souls are only wired for a single task: to glorify God. There are many means for doing this: school, soccer, and eating dinner among them. But we must acknowledge God as Lord in everything we do, not to segment him off into a single activity among others.

## **7. BEING REFINED FOR PURITY**

In New Testament times, refiners used salt as the active ingredient to refine the gold.<sup>9</sup> The refiner melted the gold in a cauldron and then poured in the salt. As the salt reacted with the impurities, they would rise to the surface and were easily skimmed away.

In the same way, our impurities are forced to the surface when we pour the gospel into our lives. We become more and more aware of our sin. As the sins that have resided deep in our heart become apparent to us, we can skim them away in repentance.

But gunk is not the only thing refined from gold. The main impurity removed from gold during the refining process is silver. Gold and silver share a similar chemical makeup, and are often found in the same ore.<sup>10</sup> The refining process removes that which is secondarily precious – silver – to purify that which is most precious.

The more the gospel takes hold of us, the more our sinful dirt will be refined out of us. But even more, as we are refined in our faith, we will sacrifice good, precious, non-sinful things just to experience more of the one who is most precious, Jesus.

## **8. THE PULL OF SINFUL INFLUENCES**

Although the black hole is one of the most perplexing mysteries to astronomers, they do know how one is created. It is born when a star dies.<sup>11</sup>

During a star's life there is a balance between two opposing forces. Fusion explosions occurring inside the star, which push away from the star, supply one force. The other force, which pushes into the star, is the gravitational pull created by the star's size. When the star dies the fusion explosions cease and give way to gravitational pull toward the star. Now without competition, the gravitational pull accelerates and rushes into the core of the former star. The rushing forces create the black hole. The gravitational forces pushing into the black hole are so fast that they exceed the speed of light. Light itself gets sucked into the black hole, unable to escape.

Throughout scripture, the sinful nature of the world is compared to darkness. The darkness of sin threatens to suck us into its evil ways. How can we withstand the strength of the world's gravitational pull towards sin?

The bigger an object in outer space is, the stronger its gravitational pull. Something with a stronger gravitational pull than the world has to enter your life if you are to stay away from sin.

God's love is bigger than sin. You will be relieved of the pull of sin when the gravitational pull of God's love – demonstrated at the cross of Christ – pulls your heart toward him.



## **9. JESUS WASN'T ASSASSINATED**

Abraham Lincoln didn't see it coming. If he had, he would have made sure his bodyguard didn't wander to the tavern next door for drinks, leaving him unprotected.<sup>12</sup> That mistake, on April 15, 1865, created the opportunity for John Wilkes Booth to creep behind President Lincoln and deliver the mortal shot to the back of the President's head.

Martin Luther King Jr. sort of saw it coming. After bomb threats delayed his flight to Memphis, he said this in his speech there, "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."<sup>13</sup> If he had seen it coming he wouldn't have stepped onto the balcony of his hotel room in the early evening on April 4, 1968.

Then there was Jesus. Not only did he see it coming, he pointed it out to those who didn't, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day" (Matt. 20:18-19). With utter precision – what we might call "attention to detail" – Jesus predicted the exact events that led to his death.

This shows that he was not assassinated. He was not a martyr. He gave his life as a sacrifice.

## **10. THE NEED FOR GOSPEL-CENTERED ENCOURAGEMENT**

In the year 1820 the field of astronomy entered a season of immense growth and discovery. This time period became known as **The Era of Great Refractors** because it was ushered in by telescopes with the largest lenses ever manufactured, up to 40 inches in diameter.<sup>14</sup>

The **Era of the Great Refractors** had an enormous impact on what man learned about our solar system and universe. The first close up photograph of the moon was taken through a great refractor. Neptune was discovered in 1846. Astronomers used great refractors to calculate the distance of stars from the earth in light years.

The fresh discovery came to a crashing halt, however, at the end of the 1800's. The reason? Something called lens sagging. The middle of these huge lenses, where it thickest and heaviest, would droop as the force of gravity pulled on the massive glass. The result was that the astronomer's view of the heavens became blurry.

This provides a picture of what so often happens to us when we face trials. As our trial weighs down on us, our vision of God gets blurry. Our perspective of God can get warped.

What we need in these circumstances is gospel-centered, not man-centered, encouragement. We need reminders that God is great, that he has made great promises, and that he is faithful to keep those promises. When we are

reminded of everything God has given us in Christ, our perspective of God is restored.

As the Era of Great Refractors came to an end, all hope was not lost for astronomers eager to map the universe. It was followed by the Era of Great Reflectors. Even bigger telescopes with mirrors nearly 17 feet wide thrust stargazers forward into the discoveries of the 1900's.

When gospel-centered encouragement takes root in your heart, it is like taking the weighed-down, warped perspective out of your heart and replacing it with a mirror. You behold God in all his glory – you center your life around him – and you reflect his infinite, eternal character to watching world. People will see God's character reflected in you as you are strengthened by his infinite power. Even if the trial doesn't end quite yet, your joy will return and God will get the glory.

## **II. LETTING YOUR LIGHT SHINE**

The way we shine the light of the gospel through how we live should help those who live in the darkness.

A lighthouse,<sup>15</sup> positioned on a rocky coast, helps sailors navigate their ships by night. Some of the ways lighthouses help are obvious: the location of the light indicates to the sailors how close they are to shore and the light shines over areas of the water that are hazardous.

It is less commonly known that each lighthouse emits light at unique intervals. This tells sailors whether they

are on the right course. If the sailors expected a lighthouse to provide two short flashes of light, but they observe a long blast followed by a short one, they will learn that they have veered off course.

The world expects everyone to indulge in sin just like them. When our lifestyle breaks their expectations – when we shine in a way they do not expect – it warns them that they have veered off course. In that way, we are to be like lighthouses for people who are sailing toward condemnation so that they are redirected on course toward Jesus.

## **12. THE BAIT OF TEMPTATION**

Anyone who grew up baiting their fishhooks with worms dug out of the back yard will be surprised at how sophisticated fishing lures are.<sup>16</sup> Experienced fishers purchase lures in specific colors, sizes, and shapes, each designed to catch particular fish in particular areas. Lures need to be precise because even the water conditions affect its success. Water temperature, sunlight, and the clarity of the water all determine whether a lure looks tempting to a fish or not.

Something similar happens when temptations splash in front of us. Unique life conditions make some sins more tempting than others. Some temptations are amplified when life is easy, some when life is hard. Some temptations are more enticing when you are by yourself, some when you are with particular circles of friends.

It's our job to know ourselves, and to know which

temptations appeal to us at which times. That way we won't be fooled by the lure, and we won't take the bait.

### **13. THE JOY OF LEARNING MORE AND MORE ABOUT JESUS**

Some mysteries lose their intrigue when you figure them out. Take a magic trick for example. When a magician performs his trick, your response is, "Wow! That's amazing! How did he do that?" But then you find a You Tube tutorial on how to do the trick. After you discover the secret, you think to yourself, "Oh, that's easy." When you figure out the mystery of a magic trick, the glory of the magician fades.

The exact opposite happens when you learn more about Jesus. As the Spirit unfolds the mysteries of Christ for you, his glory shines all the more. This is because there is no end to the wonderful things for you to discover about Christ. You learn one thing about him only to see there are infinitely more amazing things to discover.

### **14. HOW THE CHURCH KEEPS YOU CONNECTED TO JESUS**

There are two kinds of magnets: permanent, or "hard," magnets, and temporary, or "soft," magnets. The difference is that hard magnets produce their own magnetic field, while soft magnets only become magnetic when they are in the vicinity of foreign magnetic field.<sup>17</sup>

For example, a paper clip is a soft magnet. When it is

near or connected to a hard magnet, one paper clip will attract other paper clips to it. Many of us have done the experiment in science class of seeing how many paper-clips you can dangle in a chain from a magnet. What happens when a middle clip breaks loose? Half the chain tumbles down.

When it comes to the church, Jesus is like a hard, permanent magnet, and we are like paper clips. His magnetic field runs through us and holds us together. In order for us to grow in our connection with Jesus, we have to stay connected to each other. If we become isolated from the church, Jesus will have less influence on us: we will neither hear his word preached, nor celebrate the Lord's Table, nor experience the community of his body. However, the more we stay connected to other Christians – through accountability, service, and going to church – the more we will grow in our connection to Jesus.

## **15. RECEIVING NEW SPIRITUAL EYES TO SEE CHRIST**

In order for the eye to see clearly, the cornea, located at the front of the eye, directs the image in sight to the retina, located in the back of the eye. Poor eyesight happens when the cornea fails to hit the retina with image. If it misses short of the retina, the result is nearsightedness; if it misses behind the retina, the result is farsightedness.

Enter laser eye surgery. The objective of laser eye surgery is to reshape the cornea so that it can once again hit the retina with the image it is looking at.<sup>18</sup>

This sheds some light on why people fail to see Jesus as Lord. The distortion caused by sin prevents Jesus's image from focusing on our hearts. Just like laser eye surgery reshapes the cornea so that an image can come into focus, God gives the sinner spiritual sight so that Jesus can finally come into focus. After that miracle happens, you can see him clearly, as your Lord, Savior, and Treasure.

## **16. PERSEVERANCE AGAINST TOUGH SINS**

Do you have a sin that you have tried to beat but instead it keeps beating you? You may be tempted to give up fighting. But you must not give up.

Did you know that the lubricant WD-40 got its name because the first 39 experiments failed? WD-40 literally stands for "Water Displacement – 40th Attempt". Imagine what your car door would sound like if they had given up.<sup>19</sup>

It may take you 40 attempts to displace the sin in your life with godliness. It may take you 140. No matter how long it takes, don't give up. God will keep giving you the strength to fight, by his Spirit.

## **17. RESILIENCE IN THE MIDST OF TRIALS**

Grass is one of the most resilient plants in the world.<sup>20</sup> In the dry, open plains lightning can strike the grass during a storm, igniting a flash fire. The flames sprint over thousands of feet of the flat landscape, tragically outpacing fleeing animals, and burning the grass to a black crisp. The grass at first appears annihilated, but it soon

grows back out of the ashes. It can do this because the roots are beneath the surface of the ground, safe from the flames.

What will make you resilient when fiery trials flash up around you? Our natural instinct is to resort to stuff we can do. We try to outrun the flames, but that ends in disaster. What you need is faith – a faith that goes below the surface, rooted deep in your heart. Yes, you might get burnt a bit on the outside. But ultimately God will use it to grow you in new ways.

## **18. HOW SPIRITUAL GROWTH HAPPENS**

Every elementary student learns that plants grow through the process of photosynthesis. The plant uses heat from the sun's rays to convert carbon dioxide and water into the growth-giving properties of sugar and oxygen.<sup>21</sup> Stated quite simply, the plant takes the light that is available and does something with it in order to grow.

Christians grow through gospel-synthesis. We expose ourselves to the light of the gospel, to the light of God's word, and to the light of Christ. But it is not enough merely to expose ourselves to the light of the gospel. We have to do something with it in order to grow. We need to use God's grace and convert it into trust, repentance, and obedience. Then we will experience spiritual growth.



## **19. THE COST OF FOLLOWING CHRIST IS WORTH IT**

Do you know what the difference is between a bargain hunter and a smart shopper? The bargain hunter doesn't care about what they buy as much as how little they pay for it. The smart shopper, on the other hand, is concerned with making wise purchases, even if that means he or she must pay a premium. The bargain hunter will be happy with junk if the price is cheap enough, but the smart shopper is only pleased with purchases that provide lasting value.

Many, unfortunately, believe in the gospel with a bargain hunter mentality. They hear that salvation comes at no cost at all – what a bargain! – and claim Jesus as their savior. But believing in Jesus this way never results in a changed life because such a person attaches no value to Jesus. He only finds value in free salvation.

Then there are those who, like a smart shopper, recognize the price of salvation. They see what it cost Jesus at the cross. They see what it costs them in suffering and tribulation. Yet it is precisely because of the high cost of salvation that they value Jesus so much and sacrifice so much to follow him.

It is the difference between valuing a free offer, and valuing the One who offers salvation freely. It is the difference between cheap grace and costly grace. Which one do you value?

## **20. THE TRAGEDY OF HEARING GOD'S WORD BUT NOT ACTING ON IT**

On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1912, the Titanic sank to the bottom of the north Atlantic Ocean. But it should have been avoided because several ships travelling in the area sent warning messages about the dangerous icebergs. They sent these messages over the course of fourteen hours. The Titanic received the first warning from the British ship, Caronia, at 9 a.m. the morning before it sank. Then a Greek ship, Athenia, sent warning message at 1:42 p.m. Three minutes later a German ship, called the Amerika, sent a message that it had passed two large icebergs. Other warnings came at 7:30 p.m. and 9:40 p.m.

Why did these warning messages fail? To Captain Edward John Smith's credit, he ordered a change of route in response to one of the early messages. The crew had excuse in the afternoon, too, since they were busy fixing some faulty radio equipment.

But the later messages were missed because the radio operators were preoccupied. They were sending their own messages to a radio tower in Cape Race, Canada, who then relayed the messages to New York City. The Californian sent out a final warning message at 10:30 p.m., but Titanic radio operator Cyril Evans cut it off, yelling back, "Shut up! Shut up! I'm working Cape Race."

Despite all these words of warning, the Titanic continued at almost top speed, until it struck the fatal iceberg one hour and ten minutes after the last warning from the Californian.

Although Cyril Evans heard the words of warning, he did not recognize the significance of those words. He ignored them, and they had no effect on his actions or the actions of the rest of the Titanic crew.

It's easy for us – over 100 years later – to say, “How idiotic! How could he ignore such an important warning?” But we do the same thing, week-in and week-out, with far more important warnings than the Californian sent. We fail to recognize the importance of God's word. We go unaffected by it, not recognizing the significance its truths have for our life. But when we do hear the word of God and see its invaluable importance to our life, then we will drop our preoccupations, change course, and follow Jesus.

## **21. HOW TO RUN THE MARATHON OF THE FAITH**

Marathon running has steadily grown in popularity over the past few decades. Participation has grown from 25,000 runners a year in the mid-seventies to over half a million in 2010.<sup>22</sup> Anyone who has embarked on the 26.2 mile journey knows that good running preserves energy throughout the race. When each part of the body is in the proper form it saves the runner from overexerting and overcompensating.

You need to keep your head up, your shoulders low, your hands loose, your hips centered, your torso straight, your knees not too high, and your feet should hit the pavement right underneath your body.<sup>23</sup> In short, you need good form from head to toe to run the best marathon you can.

If one body part is out of place, the rest of your form is affected for the worse. Unless you are well practiced, when you focus on one part of the form, something else tenses up and goes out of alignment.

We face the same problem in the marathon of the Christian life. As we run this race, we lose proper form by becoming focused on just one aspect of the faith. During your devotions you dig deep into God's word, only to leave little or no time for prayer. You are so involved in church life the facilities manager gave you a personal set of keys, but you never bring unbelievers with you. You assume doing one thing well means you are running the race well. But you are actually running at half speed because other important pieces are out of place.

How do you keep track of all the disciplines that are vital to the Christian life? How do you align your Christian form from head to toe?

Some marathon gurus contend that if your gaze is right, everything else falls into place. When your eyes are set properly ahead of you, the rest of your body naturally falls into alignment.

If you want to run the marathon of the Christian faith well, set your gaze right. Fix your eyes on Jesus. All the Christian disciplines come into alignment – gradually perhaps, it is a marathon after all – when they each are focused on him.

## 22. RESISTING SATAN

Peter says Satan's temptation is as ferocious as a lion: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." He ferociously intends to feast on our souls.

But do you know why lions prowl? Why do they creep? Why do they sneak? It is not just for looks. It is because despite the lion's equipment of speed, strength, and sharp claws and teeth, they have low stamina. Lions are sprinters, not long distance runners. So they conserve their energy by prowling until just the right time to attack.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the freedom that God has providentially granted Satan, the Bible teaches that we can outlast him when he sprints to attack. Peter says, "Resist him, firm in your faith." James says, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). The devil is a sprinter who leaves those who resist him, looking for easier prey.

Why can we outlast Satan when he is on the hunt? Because Jesus did. Luke records that Jesus resisted all of Satan's temptations after his forty days of fasting, "And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). The writer of Hebrews tells us that since Jesus was tempted, but did not sin, we can go to him for mercy (Heb. 4:15-16).

So resist the devil through the strength and grace Jesus gives, and you will not be devoured.

## **23. RELIGION IS TOO DIRTY TO WASH AWAY YOUR SINS**

Kumbh Mela is a 55 day Hindu festival during which devotees bathe for the forgiveness of their sins at the meeting point of three rivers: the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Sarasvati.<sup>25</sup> This festival is the largest gathering of human beings on earth. Occurring every twelve years, more than 40 million people gathered in 2001, and experts estimate that 100 million will participate in 2013.<sup>26</sup> In American terms, this gathering is the equivalent of one third of the United States population traveling to bathe in the Mississippi River in a town one tenth the size of St. Louis.

It is ironic, however, that Hindus wash in the Ganges River for spiritual cleansing, since it ranks in the top five most polluted rivers on the planet.<sup>27</sup> Dysentery, cholera, hepatitis, and severe diarrhea – which is one of the leading causes of death among children in India – can all be contracted from the river.<sup>28</sup> Hindus seek ultimate cleansing from one of the filthiest places in the world.

In stark contrast, the Bible points us to the pure blood of Jesus for spiritual cleansing. He never sinned. He was the spotless lamb. Therefore he is able to wash away our sins.

More than that, we have no need to make a pilgrimage to him. He made the pilgrimage to us. No human effort can secure true forgiveness of sins. It is only received by grace through faith.

Compared to the purity of Jesus, all religious ritual is as dirty as the Ganges River. So seek forgiveness from the one who lived the perfect, pure life on your behalf.

## **24. THE POWER OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE**

Do you underestimate the power of God's unconditional love? Love shown despite one's sinful mistakes can melt the hardest of hearts. Here is one writer's account of how a simple demonstration of unconditional love led to the miraculous conversion of a woman who championed the cause of abortion:

“In 1995, while working at the clinic, Norma became haunted by the sight and sound of empty playgrounds in her neighborhood. Once teeming with kids, they now seemed deserted...But the decisive change happened when she met Emily Mackey, a seven-year-old girl whose parents were protesting at the clinic where “Miss Norma” worked. Emily, who had almost been aborted herself, befriended Norma, showing genuine interest and love, giving her hugs and inviting her to church. Through the influence this young girl's combination of truth and grace, along with those who shared the gospel of Jesus with her, Norma not only became convinced of the pro-life position but also converted to Christianity.”<sup>29</sup>

Norma is much better known by the name that was supposed to keep her anonymous: Jane Roe of Roe v. Wade.

If God can use the unconditional love of a seven-year-old to change the heart of someone as hardened by sin as Norma “Jane Roe” McCorvey, whom could he change through you? God has changed you through his unconditional love shown in the death of Jesus for your sins. Respond to that by showing God’s unconditional love to others. You never know who might come under its power.

## **25. BEING PRUNED BY GOD FOR GROWTH**

The reason pruning is so important is that the branches compete against the grapes for the nutrients that come from the vine. The vine only has a certain amount of nutrients it can deliver to the branches. If there are too many branches the vine spreads the nutrients too thinly to grow any grapes. So the vinedresser prunes most of the branches, with the result that the vine delivers nutrients to the branches with the highest possible concentration. The few remaining branches can hardly contain all the nutrients, and they burst forth with luscious clusters of grapes. The result is an increase of both the quality and quantity of fruit.<sup>30</sup>

How does the vinedresser decide which branches to prune? He cuts branches that are too old or too young. He cuts branches that have too few buds or too many. He leaves branches that he can shape into the trellis.

When it comes to spiritual growth, it is more comfortable to have lots of “branches” and just go with the flow. We want to avoid the pain of pruning.

But God requires his children to display fruit growth, not



branch growth. That is why he prunes us. Abiding in Jesus as pruned branches delivers the nutrients of his word and his love forcefully to our heart. Being pruned might not feel good at first, but in the end we will bear fruit for his glory and our joy.

## **26. THE DANGER OF PET SINS**

In 2011, a South African farmer was tragically killed by a hippo he had raised as a pet for five years.<sup>31</sup> Before the incident the owner had boasted, “They think you can only have a relationship with dogs, cats and domestic animals, but I have a relationship with the most dangerous animal in Africa.” A few months later the animal dragged him into a river and mauled him.

Do you know what can be even more dangerous than a pet hippo? A pet sin. Like the owner of an exotic pet, we think we can domesticate our sin and keep it caged up. We think it will obey us when we tell it to sit, stay, our come. We think if we train it right, this sin will not pose a threat to our soul.

Jesus taught the opposite. He said the pet sin of checking out the office hottie is so dangerous you should pluck out your eye.

John Owen is famous for saying, “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.”

With your soul on the line, be diligent to fight the smallest of sins, the dangerous ones you hold dear, that you

have a “relationship” with.

How do you put them to death? Through being raised to life with Christ. He renews your mind enabling you to perceive the danger of pet sins, and he gives you the strength to defeat them, having ultimately defeated every sin at the cross.

## **27. HOW TO PRAY WITHOUT CEASING**

Famous saxophonist Kenny G taught himself a breathing technique called circular breathing that enables him to play notes continually without having to stop for a breath.<sup>32</sup> Circular breathing requires the musician to breathe air in through his nose at the same time that he blows air out into the instrument. The trick is to build up a reserve of air in your cheeks, blowing that air into the instrument while breathing fresh air in through your nose.

Kenny G used circular breathing in 1997 to earn a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records for the longest-held musical note, sustaining an E flat for 45 minutes and 47 seconds.

For anyone who wants to pray without ceasing, the principle is the same. You have to keep inhaling from God so that you can continue exhaling prayers back to him. The trick is to have a reserve of Bible study, sermons, and conversations with your small group in your mind to draw on in order to unceasingly exhale prayers of praise, thanksgiving, confession, and requests.

Neither playing the saxophone without ceasing, nor

praying without ceasing is easy. Kenny G recounts that it took him ten years to learn circular breathing well enough to sustain a single note. It took him another ten years before he could play continuous runs of notes without stopping for a breath.

When it comes to unceasing prayer, the key is practice and habit. As you grow in this, who knows, perhaps you'll be able to sustain a single session of prayer for 45 minutes and 47 seconds.

## **28. JESUS IS THE KEY THAT UNLOCKS THE BIBLE**

The typical keyhole contains a row of tiny springs that push down on tiny cylinder shaped plugs of various lengths. The pins block the keyhole from turning over until each of the pins are pushed up into perfect alignment.

That is the key's job.

Take a glance at a key and you will notice the jagged side dips and rises. Those notches correspond to the lengths of the tiny plugs being pushed down by springs inside the keyhole.<sup>33</sup> When that key goes into the lock it belongs to, it pushes all the little plugs into alignment, allowing the key to smoothly turn over.<sup>34</sup>

Jesus is the key to the Bible because he brings each of its parts into alignment. The Old Testament story flows to him and the New Testament story flows from him. All the themes of the Bible find their significance in him. All the Old Testament Israelite practices are complete in him. All the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament are

fulfilled in him. The New Testament proclaims him. The last chapter of the Bible anticipates his glorious return.

Since Jesus brings the entire Bible – even the tiniest parts – into alignment, he is the key to unlocking its meaning and significance.

## **29. YOU CAN'T WASH YOUR SIN AWAY**

During the H1N1 flu breakout of 2009 a crew from the weekend edition of **Good Morning America** conducted an experiment with a Washington D.C. 5<sup>th</sup> grade class.<sup>35</sup> The experiment's goal was to see how well 5<sup>th</sup> graders wash their hands.

At the beginning of the day, the news crew coated the students' hands with a clear lotion that was only visible under a black light. The amount of lotion left on the kids' hands at the end of the day would reveal how well they washed their hands. If the students could wash away the invisible lotion, then surely they could wash away germs.

The students went about their classes as usual, washing their hands and using hand sanitizer throughout the day. But when the news crew shined the black light on the children's hands at the end of the school day, the results were less than sanitary. Of the 25 students in the class only two had washed well enough to remove the lotion. Many students spread the lotion over their face and clothes. Even the teacher was revealed to be a poor hand washer.

This story illustrates the obvious principle: it's hard to wash grime away if you can't see it.

Perhaps you think your life looks pretty clean. You see yourself as a good person. But sin lives inside all of us in a place where it is hard to see: our hearts. Jesus is the light who enables us to see our sin. When he shines on our hearts it becomes visible to us, and we see our need for him to wash it away.

### **30. HOW LIFE'S PRESSURE PRODUCES BEAUTIFUL OBEDIENCE**

Diamonds are formed in the earth's mantle, the area between the earth's surface and its core. Within the mantle, extreme pressure and temperatures of 1,500 degrees centigrade – fifteen times the boiling point – alter the molecular structure of carbon. The atoms of the carbon are forged together in a lattice fence-like configuration, which creates a diamond.<sup>36</sup>

But after the diamond is formed, it still has 100 miles to travel before it gets to the earth's surface where a miner can harvest it. Diamonds make the journey to the surface by riding waves of kimberlite, a volcanic rock. The kimberlite erupts like a fiery geyser at the earth's surface, and then cools and hardens, storing the diamonds for hopeful miners.

The trials we face erupt like fiery geysers. They catch us off guard when they explode. But God has a purpose for them. The extreme pressures of life forge our character

with the inner diamonds of faith, hope, perseverance, and joy. When that deeply formed character makes its way to the surface of how we live, we sparkle in obedience for God's glory.

### **31. IDOLATRY TURNS YOU INTO A CARICATURE OF YOUR IDOL**

The comical thing about caricature drawings is that they embellish some features and downplay others. The big nose is drawn extra large, and the squinty eyes are depicted with a simple line. Picture Will Smith's ears, Mick Jagger's lips, or Donald Trump's comb over. Caricature drawings take an idiosyncratic feature and make it your defining characteristic.

Idols have the same effect on us. They take something that should only be incidental to our personality and make it our defining characteristic. The result is that we become a caricature of our idol.

Think of the grown man at the stadium, shirtless, with his body painted the colors of his favorite team. He has become a caricature of his favorite team.

Think of the woman decked out in the latest fashions of an expensive brand of clothing: shoes, skirt, blouse, jacket, sunglasses. She has become a caricature of that designer.

Think of the Apple computer junkie. Even though he already owns a MacBook Air, an iPhone, and an iPad, he

waits all night to be the first to buy the newest gadget the first morning it hits the shelves. He has become a caricature of that computer.

Idols make us behave in ways that embellish the significance of the things we worship. Ultimately, we become a caricature of something that belongs to this world, rather than reflecting the image of God who created this world. But when we worship God in every aspect of our life – even sports, clothes, and computers – each feature of our life takes its shape in proper proportion. We no longer resemble an idol. God’s glory becomes our defining characteristic.

## **32. SIN IS STRONGER THAN YOU THINK**

We who nonchalantly yank down spider webs around the house underestimate the true strength spider webs have. The fact is that spider silk is one of the strongest substances known to man. Pound for pound, it is stronger than steel.<sup>37</sup> It is easy to yank a web down with a broom only because there is so little webbing there.

No wonder when a fly gets stuck in a web, it is doomed. That little bug might as well be stuck in a web of steel cables.

Just as we underestimate the strength of spider webs, so we underestimate the strength of sin. When we get caught in a web of sin, we think we can break out of it ourselves. We invent temptation-fighting techniques, we put our accountability partners on speed dial, and we

exert all the willpower we have. Those are fly-strength efforts against steel-strength sin.

You cannot beat sin in your own power. But Jesus is stronger than our sin. It is as easy for him to free us from our sin as it is for us to knock down a spider web in the corner of our garage. That is why we need Jesus to come to us, to pull us out, and set us free.

Jesus, by his Spirit, untangles us from the web of our sin throughout our entire life. That is sanctification. Though it can be disheartening that we will never be totally free from sin in this life, the fact that he is the one who untangles us assures us that we are not at risk of being eaten by that spider, the devil.

### **33. WHAT UNITES DIFFERENT PEOPLE TOGETHER IN THE CHURCH**

The writers of Pixar movies have a habit of throwing together two characters who rub each other the wrong way. Technologically up to date Buzz Lightyear exposes the insecurities of Woody in Toy Story. In Up, the young Boy Scout, Russell, annoys elderly Carl so much that when he begs Carl, “Please let me in,” as the house floats thousands of feet above the ground, Carl says, “No!” and slams the door.

But by the end of the movies Woody and Buzz are sitting side-by-side on Andy’s bed on Christmas morning. Carl and Russell are sitting side-by-side on the side of the road, enjoying a couple of ice cream cones.



What turned their conflict into camaraderie?

The answer is mission. For the toys, it was the mission of getting back to their owner. For Carl and Russell it was the mission of leading the mother of a nearly extinct species of animals to her hungry babies.

Mission has the same effect on the church. When we engage in the mission of the gospel we will learn to set aside our differences. We will discover that, not only can we be partners in ministry, we can even be friends.

### **34. LIVING LIFE TO THE FULLEST**

There are a lot of definitions of the life well lived.

William Wallace in the movie Braveheart, said, “Every man dies. Not every man truly lives.”

Abraham Lincoln said, “And in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count. It’s the life in your years.”

And then there’s Caribou Coffee which reminds us, “Life’s short. Stay awake for it.”

The problem with each slogan is that it puts the responsibility on you to get the most out life. Truly live, infuse life into your years, and don’t fall asleep, or you’ll miss it. The burden to get the most out of life, ironically, makes so many people unhappy.

The Bible says no one can make their life full, but a full

life can be given to you. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). If you want a full, abundant life, you must receive it from Jesus. You can receive that if you receive Jesus himself.

### **35. ELECTION: WHO CALLED WHOM?**

The sixth installment of C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia* is a novel called *The Silver Chair*. It starts with two classmates, Eustace Scrubb and Jill Pole, complaining about how bad their school is. Eustace tells Jill that he once went to a place called Narnia, and he guesses that if they start calling out for the king of that land, Aslan, they might be able to go there, and leave the school. So they call out his name, “Aslan, Aslan, Aslan!”

In the midst of this exercise, bullies start to chase them. Eustace and Jill run but come to a dead end: a big, stone wall with a door that is always locked. But this time it happened to be open.

As they walk through the door they are transported from their world to the land of Narnia and soon encounter the great lion. Aslan tells Eustace and Jill that he called them out of their world for a special task.

Jill replies, “Nobody called me and Scrubb here, you know. It was we who asked to come here.”

Aslan replies, “You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you.”

This illustrates how we respond to God's call on us. We might think that it was our idea to come to God first. But the fact that we had the idea at all demonstrates God's prior call on us. God calls us to himself by giving us the inclination to call on him.

## **36. THE CLEANSING EFFECT OF FORGIVENESS**

We often treat the gospel like a laundry detergent commercial. The commercial typically goes like this: the kid pours grape juice on his white t-shirt, Mom puts the stained shirt in the wash with the advertised detergent, and then presto, the stain is gone. Then the television shows a side-by-side comparison of the shirt before and after the wash. The stained shirt is on the left and the washed shirt is on the right, white enough to make an angel self-conscious.

What do we say when we see the comparison? "Yeah, right!" We do not believe it because our experience with grape juice stains and laundry detergent tells us that it is impossible.

That "yeah, right" attitude also keeps people from believing in Jesus.

God promises us that if we believe in Jesus we will be made whiter than snow. We will be purified from our sin. But our experience tells us we cannot change. We have tried everything and nothing has worked. So we hear the message of the gospel and think, "Yeah right, not me."

If that is your attitude, you are forgetting the

commercial's secret. Is the shirt on the right really the one that went through the wash? No! It's a brand new one! No laundry detergent works that well.

That is also how God makes you clean. He makes you brand new. He gives you new birth. He makes you a new creation. The old is gone, the new has come.

### **37. THE DESIRE TO KEEP GROWING IN HOLINESS**

Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player ever, and few have come close to playing at his level. But his talent did not make him complacent in developing his skills. It propelled him to always improve.

Scottie Pippen tells a story about a move he could do but Jordan couldn't. It was a baseline drive to the basket with a left-handed dunk finish.

So one day after practice, he said to Pippen, "Show me the footwork for that move." Jordan always sought ways to improve.

None of us are the Michael Jordan of sanctification. None of us is the most holy, or even close. If Jordan desired to keep developing as a basketball player, how much more should keep seeking to be like Jesus?

### **38. YOU MUST FOLLOW JESUS, NOT MERELY THE THINGS OF JESUS**

The dust storms of the African deserts temporarily blind

young elephants as they follow their mother, separating the parent from her child. Their only hope of traveling in the right direction is to keep their eyes on their mother's foot tracks.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes when the baby elephant finds the tracks it follows them in the wrong direction. Rather than meeting up with her mother and the rest of the herd, this elephant walks away from safety to certain death.

We do the same thing when we follow Jesus's "tracks" instead of following Jesus himself. You can go to church, celebrate Christmas and Easter, and serve people in need all without following Jesus himself. You can do all these things without a relationship with Jesus. Like the Pharisees, you can obey rules but walk in the opposite direction of Jesus. Worst of all, following Jesus's tracks in the wrong direction will lead you to spiritual death.

That's why Jesus says, "Follow me." He is our savior, he keeps us safe, he alone can guide us. Follow him.

## **39. THE DEVASTATION OF TRUSTING IN FALSE SAVIORS**

About a hundred years ago a tsunami killed 90% of the population of Ryoishi, a town located on the northeastern coast of Japan. Determined to never let something like that happen again, the town built a 30-foot wall to withstand tsunami waves in the future.

Upon completion of the wall, a 77 year-old man, Kawasaki Takeshi, and his wife, moved from the hills to the harbor. He said the wall made him feel safe. But in April 2011

another tsunami hit, and it decimated the wall as well as the entire village.

Takeshi expressed his surprise at the devastation saying, “This isn’t a bad place, and tsunamis don’t happen that often.”<sup>39</sup>

The article at CNN that reported this story was entitled “Misplaced Trust.” The village of Ryoishi trusted in a wall that could not save them from the wrath of a tsunami.

Don’t make the same mistake when it comes to the wrath of God. What wall are you trusting in that will not save you? Your good works? Your status at church? The fact that you have not done anything too bad? If you trust in those things, you will be surprised at the day of judgment.

Only Jesus can save you from God’s judgment. Unlike the wall in Ryoishi, he absorbed the storm of God’s wrath, so that everyone who believes in him will not merely feel safe, but be safe. Trust in Jesus is the only properly placed trust.

#### **40. PRESERVING THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL AGAINST THE WINDS OF FALSE TEACHING**

While many animals migrate during the cold winters of Antarctica, male penguins endure it while guarding a personal treasure: an egg. Without food, water, or sunlight for four months, the penguins face fierce winds and temperatures that approach 100 degrees below zero Fahrenheit.<sup>40</sup>

How do they make it so long without their eggs freezing? Each penguin carries the egg on top of its feet and underneath its coat. The feathers shield the egg from the elements, and the nearness of the egg to the body of its father keeps the egg warm.

But how do the penguins make it so long without freezing themselves? Thousands of penguins migrate together, waddling in an enormous huddle, shielded from the freezing elements. The communal voyage enables the fathers, and the next generation, to survive.

This is how the church must carry the gospel to the next generation. When the winter of a false teaching blows in we must keep the gospel close and stay close to each other. When we guard the truth of Jesus in community with one another, we can survive the bitterest winds of false teaching.

#### **41. THE “ALREADY/NOT YET” ASPECT OF OUR SALVATION**

If you have never seen a sunrise you may be surprised to learn that the eastern sky is fully brightened before the fiery sun breaks the horizon. The sun’s light is so expansive that it reaches to parts of the earth where the sun itself is not yet visible.

This illustrates the “already/not yet” aspect of our salvation in Christ. Through faith, Christ’s light already shines salvation into our soul, removing our guilt and giving us power to resist temptation. Yet we are waiting for the

complete dawn of salvation, when the presence of our sin is finally eliminated.

At Jesus' first coming the light of salvation broke over the horizon into our dark world. At his second coming the sun of salvation will fully rise, and sin – with all its effects – will be consummately abolished.

## **42. GROSS LEGALISM**

Deer Cave, on the Southeast Asian island of Borneo, contains a floor of bat dung 100 meters long.<sup>41</sup> This dung supports an entire ecosystem of cockroaches, centipedes, and crabs. The critters are born, live, breed, and die in the dung. They are completely unaware that nice green leaves grow on lush trees just outside the cave, a mere 100 meters away.

Paul compares legalism to dung. When your good works are all you know, they seem impressive. But when you discover the righteousness of God that comes through Jesus, the works of legalism are shown for what they really are. Dung.

It is not as if you have to crawl through all 100 meters to acquire God's righteousness. No, that would still be legalism. You receive God's righteousness instantly through faith in Christ so that his good works count for your gain.

## **43. SPIRITUAL GROWTH COMES FROM THE OLDEST, NOT THE LATEST**

Kevin Beiler, while a graduate student at University of



British Columbia, discovered “that all trees in dry interior Douglas-fir forests are interconnected, with the largest, oldest trees serving as hubs, much like the hub of a spoked wheel.”<sup>42</sup> Another student, Francois Teste, “determined that the survival of these establishing trees was greatly enhanced when they were linked into the network of the old trees.”

In laymen’s terms, dozens of trees in a Canadian forest shared the same root system. The older trees supported the younger trees, improving their chance of survival. To cut down just one of the older “hub” trees would spell disaster for the rest of the forest, since so many other trees depended on it.

What is true for these trees is also true for Christians. Though every generation contains its share of new ideas, new books, and new preachers, our spiritual growth depends on our connection to a network of old great saints. Their discipleship, leadership, and example help younger Christians grow strong.

#### **44. STICKING TOGETHER WHILE FACING OPPOSITION TO THE GOSPEL**

When you are making pottery, there is a special technique for bonding two pieces of clay called “score and slip.” First, you “score” the two pieces, which involves using a forklike tool to scrape grooves into the surface. Then you dap “slip” – a mixture of clay and water – over the grooves, like glue. Finally you push the two pieces together. A tight bond is made as the slip fills the grooves

of both pieces, and then dries in between them.

Without this technique, the bond is too weak to handle the heat of the kiln, and the piece will fall apart.

This provides a metaphor for Christians who suffer together for the gospel. The scoring is hardship and persecution we face – we get scraped up. The slip is God's grace. We must allow the grace of God to fill our scrapes as we face opposition. As we share in that grace together we will experience an affectionate bond that keeps us partnered in the gospel, both in good times and bad.

#### **45. SPIRITUAL GROWTH COMES FROM THE FULL BRUNT OF GOD'S WORD**

The tropics of New Guinea cover 3% of earth's land, yet surprisingly contain 50% of the world's organisms.<sup>43</sup> The reason for the vibrant wildlife is that the sun hits New Guinea straight on, in full strength, all year round. The constant exposure to the life-giving power of the sun results in massive animal, insect, and plant life in that region.

In the same way, when you constantly expose yourself to God's life giving power in the Bible, you will experience all kinds of spiritual growth.

#### **46. THE DEADLY ALLURE OF TEMPTATION**

In the pitch black caves of New Zealand, thousands of glowworms illuminate the cave ceiling. A chemical reaction in their tails emit a small blue light, making the cave

ceiling look more like a starry night sky.<sup>44</sup>

The purpose of the glowworm's light, however, is not to provide a constellation scene for cave dwelling animals.

It is to attract insects.

Glowworms hang dozens upon dozens of strands of silk from the cave roof to catch prey. Before the bugs fly to the light they find so alluring, they get caught in strands they cannot see. A jerk on the line indicates that a bug, who thought he had found a pretty light, has just met his doom. With the next meal now stuck to the silky strand, the glowworm reels in the line, and eats the insect alive.

Satan does the same thing when he tempts us to sin. He attracts you with something alluring, like money, sex, or prestige. Just when you think you are finally going to get what you, he captures you and consumes you. That is why it is so important to keep your eyes on Jesus and to find him more alluring than anything else.

## **47. TRIALS PROVE YOUR FAITH TRUE**

Back when gold was a widely accepted currency, the question often arose as to whether a coin was genuine or fake. Someone who doubted a gold piece's authenticity used droplets of Nitric acid to reveal whether it was real or not. If the piece was false gold, the acid decomposed the substance. If it was genuine, the gold remained intact.<sup>45</sup>

In the same way, the trials we encounter in life provide an acid test for your faith. They cause fake faith to dissolve. But if you have genuine faith, trials prove the authenticity of your faith by driving you to more fervently depend on Jesus. The result is that you are drawn into a closer relationship with him.

#### **48. WHAT IT TAKES TO RECONCILE**

Aesop's fable, "The Lion and the Boar," demonstrates a key principle for reconciliation. The story goes like this:

"On a summer day, when the great heat induced a general thirst among the beasts, a lion and a boar came at the same moment to a small well to drink. They fiercely disputed which of them should drink first, and were soon engaged in the agonies of a mortal combat. When they stopped suddenly to catch their breath for a fiercer renewal of the fight, they saw some vultures waiting in the distance to feast on the one that should fall first. They at once made up their quarrel, saying, "It is better for us to make friends, than to become the food of crows or vultures."<sup>46</sup>

Once the two animals saw their common enemy they reconciled their differences.

A key step in the reconciliation process is to realize that the other person is not the real enemy. The real enemy, Satan, is lurking in the background, waiting for his chance to devour you. You will not notice him as long as

you are fighting. But if you give your fight a break, you might.

Noticing your common enemy should remind you of your common ally, Jesus. He has reconciled you to God, therefore you can reconcile with one another.

## **49. THREATS TO CHURCH UNITY**

It takes less than a dozen hungry wolves to spook a herd of hundreds of caribou.<sup>47</sup> Their strategy is well conceived. One wolf runs at the herd, scaring them and sending them on the run. As panic spreads through the herd the faster caribou leave the slower ones behind. Once the slow caribou lag, usually the young, the remaining members of the wolf pack target them. The wolves are just as fast as the calves, so it is only a matter of time before a young caribou is caught.

Just like a few wolves can send hundreds of caribou on the run, a small conflict in the church can spook the entire congregation. The division that results from the conflict has the potential to isolate weaker Christians from the core of the community. On their own, or under the influence church members with agendas, these weaker believers become susceptible to all kinds of temptations. In many of the New Testament letters, the authors address issues that are rocking the faith of weaker followers of Jesus.

Maintaining the unity we have in Christ enables the church to face conflict in a way that keeps the whole flock safe.

## **50. FAKE SPIRITUAL MATURITY**

It is common for children on the cusp of their teenage years to act older than they really are. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade boy starts shaving, even though his peach fuzz has yet to grow in. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade girl starts wearing make up, sporting every color of the rainbow, all at the same time.

We might roll our eyes or shake our heads when we see this, but we have all made the same mistake in terms of spiritual maturity. We act more spiritual than we really are to impress other people. Have you ever prayed with more colorful phrases when other people are listening?

We so easily settle for the appearance of maturity, rather than actual maturity. Real maturity comes when you take your eyes off yourself and you gaze at Jesus. He accepted us in our immaturity and gives us his truth to grow us up in him. No one worries about what other people think when they focus on Jesus. And when you think about Jesus a lot you start to resemble him, which is just another way of describing spiritual maturity.

## **51. THE NECESSITY OF LIVING A NEW LIFE IN CHRIST**

Since those who have put their faith in Jesus are not merely like a new creation, but in fact are a new creation, a change in lifestyle must take place. Consider the differences between a caterpillar and a butterfly. The caterpillar crawls slowly. The butterfly flutters gracefully. The caterpillar is coated in dull greens, yellows, and blacks.

Vibrant and beautiful colors grace the wings of the butterfly.

So it is with all who have become a new creation in Christ. Do not return to the ugly, sinful living of your past. Live in grace-enabled obedience because of the change that has happened to you.<sup>48</sup>

## **52. JESUS' SACRIFICIAL, SERVANT-HEARTED LOVE**

In the cult classic film, *The Princess Bride*, Westley begins as the mistreated farm boy employed by the beautiful Buttercup. Nothing gave Buttercup as much pleasure as ordering Westley around. She commanded him to do various menial chores around the farm, to which Westley always replied, "As you wish."<sup>49</sup>

Eventually Buttercup realizes that when he said, "As you wish," Westley really meant, "I love you." Upon this realization, Buttercup discovers that she loves him in return. Buttercup is won over by Westley's gracious service and unconditional love.

Westley's love is winsome because Buttercup's numerous offenses could not deter it. The love Jesus shows us is much like this. Though we rejected him through sinful living, he came to serve us by giving his life for us. The gracious sacrifice Jesus made for us – in the face of our sin against him – woos us to love him in return.

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