MUD AND THE MASTERPIECE

SEEING YOURSELF AND OTHERS THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

John Burke
“This book reveals how Jesus restores us into God’s Masterpiece, and in the process helps us restore his Masterpiece in others.”

—Mark Batterson, author of The Circle Maker

“I wish all believers loved people who are far from God like John Burke does. Burke captures a unique aspect of a missional life in Christ that we can easily fail to grasp: We can be missional but on the wrong mission. Mud and the Masterpiece reminds us of our desperate need to join Jesus in the messy work of life-on-life discipleship.”

—Ed Stetzer, www.edstetzer.com, author of Subversive Kingdom

“John is a man who not only knows Jesus, but that Jesus really saves and redeems broken people and makes them trophies of his grace. This book gets into the heart of the ministry that has characterized John’s distinctive contribution to the contemporary church—that Jesus is Lord and Savior.”


“The phrase ‘this is what I was created for’ kept running through my mind as I read Mud and the Masterpiece. My lifelong friend John Burke captures the heart of Jesus to summon the best from each of us. I’ve watched John live this message for the past several decades. Come and see the bold love of God, who invites everyone—from skeptics to the spiritually stuck to the religiously arrogant—to follow Jesus Christ while surrounded by authentic friendships and energized by a shared mission.”

—Ken Cochrum, DMin, global vice president, Student-Led and Virtually-Led Movements
“Hope is a dangerous thing. This book drips with hope. Burke is a master storyteller and his stories, woven together with the electric stories of Scripture, grab the heart and ignite the mind. Burke helps us believe that God can do more in and through us, with everyday people we meet in everyday situations. Pick up this book, and your hope will rise.”

—Doug Schaupp
growth coach, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, coauthor, I Once Was Lost

“In Mud and the Masterpiece, John has once again captured a fresh vision of a Jesus who is not only worth following, but orienting and giving our entire lives to. In simply but poignantly looking at Jesus’ various interactions with people throughout the Gospels, he is able to underscore the call Jesus gives to us in each conversation, a call that goes beyond clever ministries, strategies, or apologetics. It’s the call to be found in a story much larger than ourselves.”

—Mike Breen, 3DM global leader
MUD AND THE MASTERPIECE

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MUD AND THE MASTERPIECE
SEEING YOURSELF AND OTHERS THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

John Burke

(Burke_Mud&Masterpiece_EC_djm.indd 5 10/23/12 1:05 PM)
I want to dedicate this book to my beautiful bride, best friend, and ministry partner.

Kathy, you have an amazing gift for calling out God's Masterpiece in everyone you meet, and I've benefited the most!
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Introduction

Do You Follow Jesus?

If you ask people on the street for one word to describe Christians today, what would they say? I’ve asked this question while speaking to Christians and church leaders all over North America, Europe, Scandinavia, and Australia, and I find it very troubling that we all know the answers: “judgmental,” “narrow-minded,” “arrogant,” “hypocritical,” “bigoted.”

These seem to be the most commonly agreed upon one-word answers. Of course, none of us think we could be rightly accused of these attitudes, and yet maybe it’s not just what we’re doing wrong, but what we’re failing to do right that brings these negative stereotypes. Maybe it’s something we really are not aware of that tends to infect us over time, as it seems to be especially prevalent in post-Christian societies where authentic faith and traditions cross ways.

During Jesus’ day, if you asked the average Joe (or Joseph) in Jerusalem to give one word to describe Jesus, I think you’d get a much different set of words. So why doesn’t the average person describe the average Christian with words that match Jesus’ life and ministry: “Loving,” “kind,” “compassionate,” “wise,” “merciful,” “truthful,” “hopeful,” “healing,” “helping,” “caring,” “life-giving”? 
Introduction

When you look around you, do you see many people wanting to know about your God because they see a glimpse of a greater love, more abundant life, and new kind of freedom in you and your friends? Is God restoring what’s lost and damaged in this world through you? If not, we ought to ask ourselves a very provocative question: “Why aren’t we more like the One we follow?”

Right after I wrote these words in JFK airport, I quickly boarded my plane to Scandinavia to speak to church leaders there. I walked back to the flight attendant, Michael, and asked if he could fill up my empty water bottle. He said, “We’re not supposed to . . . but here, I’ll do it.” Michael and I had been talking for about ten minutes when he asked, “So, what do you do?”

“I’m a pastor,” I said.

“Oh my gosh, that is the LAST thing I would ever have guessed.” Michael kept expressing how shocked he was because I didn’t seem like “those people.” He told me the horrible experiences he had with Christians and why he became Buddhist. And he asked me, “Why are Christians like that?”

I told him, “Honestly, because not all Christians truly have the heart of Jesus for other people.” Now, here’s the shocking thing—Michael, who disdained Christians, almost wouldn’t let me sleep! He wanted to know more about Jesus and even wanted to attend our Internet Campus. Why?

I think because he sensed something. I think he sensed God’s heart for him somehow coming through me.

For the last twenty-five years, I’ve seen the Michaels of the world find faith, follow Jesus, and even begin restoring and leading others to follow Jesus as his church. After seeing this happen in thousands of lives, I’m convinced that our problem is not that we need more evangelistic tools, methods, apologetic arguments, or missional strategies—in fact, none of these will be worth anything if we don’t first see ourselves and others through the eyes of Jesus. I truly believe people intuitively sense how we feel about them (even in a ten-minute conversation), and that makes the biggest difference of all.
This book flows out of an intensive study looking at every encounter Jesus had with people—all people. What caused so many people who seemed far from God to flock to Jesus? Why did he have such a magnetic pull on people in the world? I observed and analyzed his words, his attitude, what was recorded about his body language, and how people must have experienced him. I realized that people could see something in the eyes of Jesus that conveyed an attitude we must adopt.

I looked at the actions of Jesus and what he had his followers do to walk in his footsteps. I looked at his kind words, his hard words, and the timing of all of them. I studied the four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and teachings in chronological order (through what is called a Harmony of the Gospels*), and I discovered revealing insights into the timing of Jesus’ words and actions. And accidentally, I noticed something else.

I noticed the encounters of the Pharisees with the same people.

I found it shocking to realize that Jesus’ one-word descriptions of the Pharisees were very similar to the average person’s description of Christians today. In fact, I noticed the way the Pharisees seemed to think about, treat, and talk about people outside their “church parameters.” It matched what I’ve sometimes noticed among Christian groups I’ve been a part of and have even led. I realized I, too, have sometimes looked less like Jesus and more like a Pharisee.

This led to an important realization that can help all of us if we’re willing: Falling into the trap of the Pharisees is not something anyone ever does intentionally. It happens slowly, gradually, in little incremental ways that rob us year by year of becoming the kind of people Jesus intended—people who actually follow Jesus in attitude and action, bringing life, love, and a truth that sets people free. And I’m convinced we all must fight pharisaical creep. For us to become the kinds of people God intended, we have to let God

restore us into more of the Masterpiece he intended us to be. We must see ourselves through the eyes of Jesus so we can cooperate with him in restoring others.

Part 1 of *Mud and the Masterpiece* will help you experience Jesus in a new light. We will explore his attitudes toward people, all people, imperfect people and those who thought they weren’t so bad. Through exploring stories of imperfect people, your heart will change as you experience God’s merciful, masterful restoration of the most sin-stained works of art, both today and in Jesus’ day. You will begin to see yourself and others the way Jesus did, and that will change everything.

In the stories I tell, I’ve chosen to change everyone’s name unless they specifically asked me to use their real name. I’ve indicated real names with a diamond (♦). I’ve included many stories because they demonstrate God’s merciful attitude toward imperfect people today, and how Jesus is still actively restoring those whom the Pharisees wrote off as hopeless. I believe if we are willing, God can restore us into truly life-giving people whom others really want to be around, because they see in us what people saw in Jesus.

Once we get an attitude adjustment, we will be ready to participate with God in the greatest restoration project of all times—the reclamation and restoration of God’s Masterpiece, his image artistically incorporated in every human being we meet. Jesus left his followers with an example to follow and a plan for bringing restoration to the world around us life by life. In part 2, we will learn from Jesus’ instructions to his followers, and we will explore a way to follow his Spirit together, so that we begin to see the same life-giving, loving impact that Jesus brought to a damaged world.

In order to align our attitude with that of Jesus, we must position ourselves to see in new ways. At the end of each chapter, there will be the opportunity to take time to reflect in prayer on attitudes that may subtly infect you. Then I’ll encourage you to take a risk and try some things that will challenge pharisaical tendencies and allow God to bring your heart in line with his heart.
Introduction

Through motivating stories of ordinary, restored followers of Jesus all around the world, you will catch a vision for a life of adventure with God and others that will be contagious. I pray that through this book, you will see that there’s hope for all of us because God is a Master Artist who wants to restore his crowning creation. Let the restoration project begin.
PART 1

SEEING THROUGH THE EYES OF JESUS

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
A Glutton, Drunk, and Friend of Sinners

Will you pray for us? We need help.” I stood in disbelief, trying not to show it, as Derek and Zoe approached me after a service. First, I could hardly believe they were at church—Zoe had only come once or twice—but even more amazing was her willingness to seek prayer and help. If you knew what I knew that day, you’d be amazed too!

Zoe was a young mother of two. She longed to give her kids a better life than she had. I looked into her eyes, full of emotion,
and I wondered what I should say. After all, she knew that I knew she was living with Derek, and this was the first time I’d met her. But there’s more to the story.

I knew Zoe’s story through Derek. I had met Derek a year before. I was on my way to visit my mother when a voice behind me called, “Young man—wait!” I turned around to see an elderly woman racing her wheelchair down the hall toward me. “Aren’t you the pastor of that church full of young people?”

“Yes, I am. I’m John, what’s your name?”

“I’m Susan, and my grandson is in the hospital. Will you visit him? It’s really important because he just got out of prison, and he needs to go to your church.”

Requests like these are always awkward. Probably the last thing her grandson would want is some unknown pastor-dude showing up at his grandmother’s request. I tried to explain that to Susan, but she was insistent, so I finally said that I would have someone go visit him even if I couldn’t.

The next week was my son’s thirteenth birthday, and I had planned a day-long Man Quest, where he would complete a series of assignments that would teach him what it meant to be a man like Jesus. The quest for courage came first (at the skate park!), followed by the quest for compassion. I had planned for us to serve at our food pantry, but it was closed. So in a panic, I prayed for some way to teach my son about compassion, and instantly, Derek came to mind.

It turned out Derek was incredibly grateful for our visit to the hospital that day, and he shared with us how drugs landed him in prison. He had just given his life to Christ and was given early hospital release the same month. We encouraged him that day, and he started coming to our church. Soon his brother and his father were also coming. And then Derek met Zoe several months later. They got sexually involved and moved in together. Until that morning, I hadn’t seen Derek in months. But I knew of the mess he had gotten into.

Derek’s father informed me that Derek had really fallen in love with Zoe’s kids the past four months living with them. And yet his
relationship with Zoe was so tumultuous, at times it was borderline
violent. And I knew from Derek’s friend, Ted, that Zoe was not a
single mom. Actually, she was still married—to a guy who traveled
a lot and didn’t mind an “open marriage.” I knew this situation
was horrible, but what should I do?

All these things flashed through my head like lightning as the
words “Will you pray for us?” still hung heavy in the air that Sunday
morning. I knew from experience that this was a moment pregnant
with the potential to bring forth spiritual life, or the potential for
miscarriage. What I said, but even more importantly, what I held
in my mind’s eye and in my heart for these two people was critical.

“Will you pray for us?” Is that what I should do? Is that all I
should do? What would you do? What would you be thinking?
What would be in your heart?

I’ve come to realize how critical the answers to these questions
are for those who truly want to be like Jesus to the people around
them.

The Mud or the Masterpiece

If you talk to people who seem far from God, many tend to admire
Jesus, but often they can’t stand his followers. Jesus still has an
intriguing and mysteriously attractive pull on people, but many
Christians create a repelling force. That’s troubling, especially when
you consider how the Dereks and Zoes of Jesus’ day felt a mag-
netic attraction toward Jesus, but were repelled by the condemn-
ing religious leaders. In fact, Luke tells us “all the tax collectors
and the sinners were coming near [Jesus] to listen to Him” (Luke
15:1, NASB). The Pharisee religious leaders called Jesus a glutton,
drunk, and friend of sinners (Luke 7:34) to discredit him, mainly
because Jesus had an enormous, life-giving impact on so many
like Derek and Zoe.

Maybe the reason people today are drawn to Jesus but not his
followers is because many Christians are NOT like Jesus—we
Seeing Through the Eyes of Jesus

don’t really see what Jesus sees in other people. We don’t really feel the way Jesus felt toward people straying far from God, living messy lives. Christians can subtly become pharisaical without even realizing it!

Ultimately, the impact we have on the people around us will tell us if we’re more like Jesus or more like the Pharisees. “You will know them by their fruit,” Jesus said (see Luke 6:44). “Everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher” (Luke 6:40). The backbone of this book comes from an in-depth study through the Gospels analyzing every encounter Jesus had: How did he treat people? What was he feeling or thinking? What was his attitude? What did he say? What did he do? What did Jesus convey that contrasted so sharply with the Pharisees? As we learn from Jesus’ encounters, I want you to wrestle with this question throughout this book: “Am I more like Jesus or more like a Pharisee to the people around me?” The answer may not be as black and white as you think.

When my wife and I lived in St. Petersburg, Russia, I got to see one of my favorite paintings housed in the Hermitage Museum. It’s Rembrandt’s famous painting Return of the Prodigal Son. It depicts that moving scene in Jesus’ parable when, “filled with compassion” (Luke 15:20), the father (God) ran toward his wayward son. The son had squandered his inheritance with loose living, but came begging for mercy. The father embraced him, saying, “My son was dead but now is alive; was lost but now he’s found” (see Luke 15:24). Jesus paints this beautiful, priceless picture in answer to the religious people’s complaint that he “welcomes sinners” (Luke 15:2). The painting is worth a fortune.

Now just imagine if one day you visit St. Petersburg, and there in a back-alley dumpster you discover Rembrandt’s masterpiece, but it’s hardly recognizable. It’s covered in mud and dirt, it’s stained, and the canvas has been torn. You wouldn’t recognize it at all, except you notice the famous hand of the father on the ragged son’s back. How would you treat this painting? Would you treat it like trash? It’s covered in mud, stained and torn—is it worthless?
Do you treat it like it’s worthless? Or would you treat it like a million-dollar masterpiece that needs to be handled with care and restored? I’m guessing all of us could see past the mud and even the damage to recognize the immense value inherent in this one-of-a-kind work of art—simply because it was created by Rembrandt’s own hand. We wouldn’t try to clean it up ourselves; we would bring it to a master, who could delicately restore it to its original condition.

So why do we struggle to treat people like the immensely valuable, one-of-a-kind Masterpiece God created with his own hand? As I study the life and interactions of Jesus with very sin-stained, muddied people, it becomes evident that Jesus could see something worth dying for in all the people he encountered. Jesus could see past the mud to the Masterpiece God wanted to restore.

What do you see most when you encounter the Dereks and Zoes of the world? What do you see when you look in the mirror? Do you see the mud? Or do you see the Masterpiece God wants to restore? What you focus on determines who you become and the impact you have on people around you! That’s the heart of this book.

The Pharisees primarily focused on the mud of sin that covered the lives of the irreligious. They prided themselves in mud-avoidance. They fixated on mud. They tried to clean the mud off others with their own dirt—it didn’t work then, and it doesn’t work now!

Jesus was different. Jesus demonstrated a spiritual vision that he wants to impart to us—to see the Masterpiece he sees in us, and to renovate us to become people whose hearts reflect what God sees, under even the muddiest sin-stained life. Jesus saw God’s Masterpiece, waiting to be revealed by his grace, and as a result, many people actually became what he envisioned them to be.

The Artwork of Grace

That’s what God’s grace is all about! God’s grace cleanses and restores all willing people! We may trust in God’s grace, but do
we live in it? Do we exude grace to others? And how do we show grace like Jesus did to mud-stained Masterpieces?

Paul explains what God’s grace did through Jesus:

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 2:4–7, italics mine

Notice what this says—we were all dead spiritually. Muddied, damaged, sin-stained paintings thrown in the dumpster. None of us brought ourselves back to life spiritually, nor can we clean ourselves up and restore ourselves into what God intended without God’s help. But by his grace—his undeserved favor, good will, loving-kindness offered freely—we can be restored!

And notice the words describing God’s heart—he has great love for you, me, Derek, and Zoe; he has abundant grace to give, demonstrated through his kindness, and he is rich in mercy. As we will see, love, kindness, and mercy flowed liberally from Jesus’ life, but the Pharisees’ well was dry when it came to mercy. Paul continues:

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Ephesians 2:8–10 nlt, italics mine

The word translated “masterpiece” or “workmanship” is the Greek word poiema—from which we get the word “poem.” It’s a Work of Art—the work of a Master Artist. Do you realize you are God’s Masterpiece, his Work of Art? Next time someone says
“Wow—you’re a piece of work,” just say, “That’s right, I am!—Artwork, buddy!”

“By grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8). A person living in Jesus’ time would hear the Greek word _sodzo_, translated “saved,” and think of being carried to safety, made whole, or restored—restored to the original condition. God saves us—he restores us into right-relatedness with himself, he makes us secure by adopting us as his own children, and he begins a lifelong process to restore the original Work of Art he imagined before we were born! In fact, God sees it already completed. He already sees us raised with Christ seated with him (see Ephesians 2:6).

Grace tells you that all God needs is your faith—giving yourself in trust back to your Creator, giving him permission to renovate and restore and bring to life his Masterpiece in you! _That’s true for all human beings_ (John 12:32). God pictures you as someone more awesome and wonderful than your imagination has ever dreamed. Do you see yourself like God does—as a living Work of Art he’s wanting to restore to its full value? Do you see others that way? What you see matters!

**Skydiving With Jesus**

When I first met Nate*, I never would have imagined God would change so many men’s lives through his. Nate was a mess! But his mud was the acceptable kind. As a young twenty-something with a greed-starved drive to make millions, he got involved in a brokerage firm where ethics and moral integrity were optional. He played right along with the game until both his bosses almost landed in jail.

When he moved to Austin, Texas, he started his own business and invested all his proceeds, making a small fortune. The only money he’d spend was feeding his wild side—thrill seeking, skydiving, streaking down the aisle of a commercial flight at 30,000 feet (obviously pre-9/11!), trips to Cancun or Vegas, where he’d
drink all night and wake up in the bed of some woman he didn’t know.

And then Jesus showed up!

Nate had just begun to follow Jesus when we met. We started a small group in his house that became Gateway Church. Nate was always the spark, the life of the party. I could see God’s gifts—that risk-taking zest for life, adventure, laughter, fun, those were all gifts from God—hidden gems of faith getting misdirected. God started restoring Nate, but Nate kept sling ing mud on himself.

Later that year, I had to lovingly confront Nate because God was uncovering a Masterpiece in him, but he kept hiding it under more and more mud. I saw a pattern in him of dating and using weak-willed, anorexic-looking women.

“Nate! Why do you keep dating women who are not healthy, then using them sexually? Is that really who you want to become?” I asked one night on his driveway.

“I had never thought about it before,” he answered. Nate later reflected how that conversation and one other got him focused on the Masterpiece instead of the mud. “I didn’t see it until that night, but as I reflected on it, I realized it was another symptom of the deeper disease—trying to play God of my life. My only criteria was thin, sexy, and broken because I could control them. It was the same insecurity driving everything—my hoarding of money, my effort to be in power over women, my inability to truly connect and love and give to others.”

Nate started meeting with Joe as Spiritual Running Partners.* At first, every week they confessed their failures—but nothing seemed to change. Accountability wasn’t working. “I’m a terrible person,” Nate heard Joe say in shame one day. He felt the same way. But as they committed to reading Scripture and memorizing passages about who they are in Christ, something dawned on Nate. “You’re

*Spiritual Running Partners consist of two to four people meeting regularly to help each other run this marathon of faith, following a format of confessing sin, encouraging spiritual fruit, and helping each other put intentional practices in place to grow.
not a terrible person—you’re all these promises in Christ. We need to help each other believe them and let God chip away this other stuff that’s foreign to who God made us to be.”

That made all the difference! I’ve gotten a front row seat to watch God’s amazing restoration of my friend from greedy to generous, from stupid-risky to full of risk-taking faith, from unethical and immoral to one who loves people and cares about how his actions impact them. And it didn’t take long for that gift of faith to kick in, and Nate started taking other muddied men on faith adventures—calling out the Masterpiece in them. I’ve watched God use Nate to transform hundreds of men’s lives. And God wants your life to not only reflect his Work of Art in you, but for you to be a paintbrush in the hand of God to restore others.

**Attitude Adjustment**

Your life, as we will see, was meant to be a tool of restoration in the hands of the Master Artist. But we must become more like Jesus than the Pharisees—and that starts with the right attitude of heart. Jesus must have pictured what he created people to be, and that vision affected how he felt about them. I’m sure those he encountered picked up on his attitude toward them, and that’s probably why so many muddied people flocked to him—in his eyes they saw a glimmer of hope for who they were meant to be.

I’m convinced that people intuitively pick up on our attitude toward them. What’s in our hearts toward people will be felt by them. Do we have good will toward all people? Are we for people, or really against some of them? Do we truly believe they have immense value and worth to God? Or are we secretly disgusted, bothered, shocked, judgmental, wanting to “fix them” quickly? I’ve come to believe that many Christians repel those who don’t follow Christ because we don’t share God’s heart for them. Why?

Some of us may have come to faith in Christ under a Gospel of Mud-Management rather than a Gospel of Restoration Grace.
Maybe we think God saves us, and then we clean ourselves up out of gratitude, while trying hard to avoid mud. First, that doesn’t work (read Galatians). Second, it misses the point—Masterpiece restoration is a work only the Master Artist can do!

Some of us are highly critical—trained to see what’s wrong. Mud-spotting, flaw-finding, failure-anticipating might even be our profession. My father was an engineer, and I, too, have an engineering degree and worked as an engineer, and I have a critical eye for what’s wrong. I’ve discovered this works really well with problems, but not with people! I’ve discovered personally, I must allow Jesus to restore in me “eyes to see” what he sees. As I begin to see value in people like Jesus did, and even point out how I see God drawing individuals to himself, many seek him and find him.

Chip and Dan Heath, in their book *Switch*, give many examples demonstrating how pointing out progress motivates forward movement. For instance, Dave Ramsey helps people climb out of deeply entrenched debt. But his approach is counterintuitive. Most financial advisors would instruct a person to pay off the highest interest rate debt with the greatest balance first (because it’s costing you the most interest—which makes sense). But Dave found that approach usually doesn’t work. People get so demotivated by how much needs to change, they stay stuck. Instead, he suggests the Debt Snowball. List all debts from smallest balance to largest, then make only minimum payments on every debt except the smallest (regardless of interest rates). Throw every dollar available toward that smallest debt until it’s paid, then move on to the second smallest debt, then the third smallest and so on. What Dave found is that with each debt conquered, greater progress can be seen, and motivation grows. He’s helped people with close to $100,000 of debt, stuck for years, finally slay the debt dragon. There’s something motivating about someone pointing out progress versus pointing out how far you have to go!

I’ve seen the same pattern in Jesus’ encounters, and I’ve seen it motivate thousands of people to come to faith in our day. Jesus would point out progress: “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34), “I have not found such great faith” (observing...
a Roman centurion, Luke 7:9). A Gospel of Mud Management focuses only on the mud. A Gospel of Restoration Grace sees God’s progress and hope because he’s already paid all of our debts! They just have to receive it.

Which Gospel we hold affects how we actually feel about ourselves and other muddied people. If we picture God’s goal for life as mud management, we will quickly judge and push away muddied people, or try to scrape off the mud ourselves, or just avoid them so we won’t get muddied. But that was not Jesus’ approach. That was the way of the Pharisee.

Zealous for What?

It does little good to call ourselves followers of Jesus if our lives and our influence don’t reflect Jesus’ life. Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12 NIV). God fully intends your life, as performance art lived in concert with his Spirit, to have the same influence on the world around you as Jesus did.

“We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (literally, “to walk in,” or “live in,” Ephesians 2:10 NIV 1984). What you do in life following God’s lead becomes a living Work of Art—poetry in motion. God prepared you in advance for a unique purpose only he knows—a masterful picture of a life well lived, that truly brings purpose, fulfillment, and eternal beauty to you and to the people around you—just like Jesus did! All he needs is faith—you growing to trust his leadership more and more. That’s what I hope to help you do, so that you have his impact.

But it’s not just up to you. God intends Christ-followers to work together as his body on earth. Through your church or Christian Network working as one body, Jesus will re-present himself restoring the world around us. I’ve seen him do it through hundreds of
ordinary people like you’ll read about in the stories of this book—ordinary people having an extra-ordinary impact because they’re seeing what Jesus sees and following his Spirit in their encounters with people.

Today in Christian circles, I’m hearing more and more about being missional Christ-followers, meaning the church should never be a place where people sit and listen and do nothing good in the world. The church is people, being Jesus’ body, on Jesus’ mission with him. That’s what this book is about. But I believe Christians can be missional on the wrong mission, and not realize it! That’s even more what this book is about!

How do we make sure we are truly on mission with Jesus rather than falling prey to the mission of the Pharisees? We might reject the notion that we would ever be pharisaical, but I find it’s not so black and white. We can subtly find our hearts becoming pharisaical toward the very people Jesus came to restore.

**Missional on the Wrong Mission**

The Pharisees were not all bad. When we see them through such polarizing glasses, we set ourselves up to be blind to the same tendencies that deceived many well-intentioned religious people in Jesus’ day. The Pharisees were actually reformers—that’s why Jesus’ harsh confrontation of them shocked so many. The Pharisees saw the moral decay increasing all around them due to Roman influence, and they were concerned for God’s laws given through Moses (Matthew 9:11). Many Christians today have similar concerns and great zeal for moral reform, but how do people really change according to Jesus?

The Pharisees loved the Scriptures—they diligently studied! (John 5:39). They prided themselves on staying true to Moses and the prophets, but they missed the heart of it all! (Matthew 23:1–3). The hard truth we need to see here is that it is possible to diligently study the Bible, yet miss Jesus’ mission entirely.
A Glutton, Drunk, and Friend of Sinners

And the Pharisees were evangelistic! They valued making converts to the one true God. Yet Jesus said, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are” (Matthew 23:15). They were missional on the wrong mission!

Is it possible that many Christians today who desire moral reform, love the Word of God, and pride themselves on teaching truth could be missional on the wrong mission—failing to demonstrate the heart of God to a broken world?

Absolutely!

Hey, if Jesus called Peter “the rock,” and yet Peter was deceived at least twice, if James and John missed Jesus’ heart several times, if Paul was zealous for God yet persecuted the church . . . who do I think I am if I proudly say, “Not me!” Phariseeism can sneak up on all of us!

So what was it that caused the Pharisees to be zealous for the wrong mission?

They had no mercy or compassion for broken, muddied people! They did many things right, but they didn’t see themselves or others accurately. They had an “us/them” mentality. They believed God belonged to the “good people” (us) and wanted nothing to do with the “bad people” (them). So they separated themselves. That’s where Jesus and the Pharisees collided.

The Heart of Jesus

Marc owned two bars on Sixth Street—where everyone from Austin goes to party. Most of his life, wherever Marc went the party followed, so he decided to make a living of it. Triple Play (Marc’s sports bar) and The Loft both made great money—enough to fund his rockstar-style drug habit. For years the alcohol, drugs, sex, and crowds of people living the vida loca with Marc helped him outpace the emptiness and deep insecurities he had run from.
Seeing Through the Eyes of Jesus

his whole life. But now at the young age of 28, they finally caught up with him.

One night after closing time, Marc sat at the bar with his head in his hands, thinking, “There’s got to be something better!” Marc recalls, “My drinking and drugging had become unmanageable, but I wouldn’t admit it. I relied on it to maintain the only identity I knew—life of the party Marc.’ My girlfriend couldn’t take my out-of-control behavior and left me. I was despondent. I knew something had to change.”

Marc had encountered several people in his bar who mentioned Gateway Church. They had been invited by others and started to explore life with Jesus, and the picture of life they were starting to see was worth talking about. Longing for a better life, Marc started coming to Gateway.

Nate, the skydiver I mentioned earlier, heard that Marc spoke fluent Spanish and asked him to go to Mexico on a trip he was organizing. A group of men were going to build a house for a family in need. When Marc met Nate, he wasn’t planning on going—he didn’t feel worthy.

“Nate’s first words to me were, ‘You’re Marc, the one who’s gonna translate for us in Mexico?—that’s so awesome!’” Marc recalls. “Nate was so excited and passionate about it, I didn’t have the heart to tell him no, so I went. Responding to that invitation changed everything.”

Matthew sat in his tax office, gainfully employed in his crooked business when Jesus came and said, “Follow me” (Matthew 9:9). Jesus had been hanging out in Matthew’s region of Galilee for about a year, and no doubt Matthew had heard about Jesus and probably followed him around. But Matthew had not yet left his despised trade—known among the religious to attract immoral, unethical, “sinful” people—tax collectors were the “bad guys.” In today’s terms, it would be like Jesus walking into the bar saying, “Marc, follow me.”

Matthew must have seen in Jesus’ eyes a vision of something better he could become. He was so excited, he threw a big party.
for Jesus at his big house (an indication of his wealth gained from his unethical business). Though he only had a glimpse of the Masterpiece Jesus saw in him, it was attractive enough to want all his friends to have the same.

Even though Matthew had been hanging around Jesus, he was also still hanging out with his friends who partied, drank too much, had immoral tendencies, and were dishonest, because that’s who came to the party. Mark even points out “there were many of them, and they were following [Jesus]” (Mark 2:15 NASB). That’s what convinced the religious people something was wrong with Jesus.

When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Matthew 9:11–13

Don’t miss Jesus’ biting sarcasm! Who were these “healthy, righteous” people Jesus was talking to?

The Pharisees who would eventually have him killed!

They weren’t healthy; they were hiding! They weren’t righteous; they were playing religious “us/them” games to feel good about themselves—but their hearts were far from God (Mark 7:6). Jesus points this out—they used religion to mask what was missing inside: mercy!

Jesus tells them to go learn what this means. He quotes Hosea 6, where God calls Israel’s love a mist—it appears and then is gone—they’ve been unfaithful to God: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice; and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (v. 6). God is getting at the heart of what he wants for his people—not just religious sacrifices (“I don’t do that like they do”), or offerings (“look at me; I serve, I tithe, I attend, I’m good!”). God wants something else. He wants hearts like his, full of a mercy that flows
like a river of love from the One who offers mercy to me, and you, and Marc too.

As we will see throughout the Gospels, Jesus doesn’t have an “us/them” picture of people—those who are “healthy” and then those “other people” who need God’s mercy and help to find restoration. Jesus sees just “people”—all of us broken, muddied, sin-stained, marred Masterpieces that only the Master Artist can restore. Jesus came for all people who are honest about their desperate need for God’s restoration work. Is that you? If so, fantastic! Let’s pray that God uses this study of Jesus’ life and encounters to align our hearts with his and fulfill his people-restoration mission in us and through us.

Life by Life

As we will see, Matthew and friends followed Jesus for one year, and then Jesus sent Matthew out to do the very things Jesus did for him. Two and a half years later, Jesus commissioned Matthew and friends to lead his church, restoring the world wherever they went. And I’m convinced Jesus wants to do the same thing through you and your friends! In fact, if we look around three to five years from now, and none of our “tax collector, sinful” neighbors are following Christ and even leading his restoration mission forward, we need to reconsider if we are missional on Jesus’ mission. I’ve watched hundreds of ordinary people, in churches and Christian Networks around the world, restoring God’s artwork, life by life. You can too.

Marc recalls, “On the way to Mexico, all these men were telling their stories of where they’d been in life—many had been right where I had been—but the difference I saw was that they weren’t doing life alone anymore. They were in it together, and they were helping each other become what God intended—I wanted that! I opened my heart to Christ, got baptized, and got involved in a recovery group and a men’s small group—which helped me overcome drugs and grow tremendously.”
Though making great money with his bars, Marc felt God leading him out of the bar business—a huge step of faith, but he found huge blessings on the other side. One of our church Networks now meets in his old bar! (We’ll talk about how you can start a Network in part 2.) Marc’s girlfriend saw such positive change, she started hanging around Marc’s new friends and found faith, and today they’re happily married.

Several years later, Nate challenged Marc to start his own men’s group, and Marc invited Corey to join it. Corey had moved from Miami to work in Austin as a physical therapist, but got involved in the same life Marc had come from. Corey saw in Marc the vision of the man he could become. Corey started following Jesus in that group of men, allowing Jesus to do his restoration work in him. Within a couple of years, Corey was making radical decisions to be an instrument of mercy and restoration in the hands of the Master Artist.

Serving refugee families with others at Gateway, Corey decided to move into the low-income part of town to be a minister of mercy and hope among refugees. Marc equipped Corey to lead, and today Corey spiritually leads a group of men. Corey got his group involved demonstrating mercy and love to the elderly. They started visiting the retirement community where I met Derek’s grandmother.

And there Corey met Derek!

Corey and Derek have become friends. I have no idea how the story will unfold, but I see Corey showing love and mercy to Derek and Zoe, calling out the Masterpiece under the mud—just as Marc did for him, and Nate and others did for Marc, and I did for Nate, and Randy Worrell did for me. And someone must have done for you too!

That’s why I could look Zoe and Derek in the eyes that Sunday morning and say, “I’m so glad you’re here. I’d love to pray for you. God has great plans for both of you if you’re willing to follow him.” That’s how God the Artist restores his Masterpiece, life by life! And he will do the same in you and make a huge impact through
you—if you’re willing. Are you willing to let God’s restoration process begin with you?

QUESTIONS AND ACTIONS

1. Reflect on this: Do you tend to focus most on the mud or the masterpiece when you see yourself? How about when you see others muddied by sin and brokenness? Why is this?

2. Try this: Ask God to lead you to people this week who look muddied to you. Engage them in conversation. Your only goal is to ask questions, listen, and learn about them as people, uniquely created by the Master Artist.

Notes

Let’s just go for fun! We’ll see how much we can push their buttons,” Amy teased her girlfriend, who didn’t like the idea of hanging around a bunch of Christians. “Come on,” Amy insisted. “I hear their motto is ‘Come as you are.’ I just want to prove that they’re ‘come as you are’ . . . unless you’re gay.”

Amy had been in a nine-year lesbian relationship that had broken up, leaving her wondering why her deepest longings could never be satisfied. She and Rachel had just started hanging out when they decided to attend one Sunday morning.
“I came on a mission to shock people,” Amy admits. “Rachel and I would hold hands in front of people, but instead of the disgusted looks of contempt we expected, people met eyes with us and treated us like real people. So we started coming to church weekly. We kept moving closer to the front each week, trying to get a reaction so that we’d be rejected sooner rather than later. When we couldn’t shock people, we stopped trying and started learning.

“Not long after that, Rachel and I stopped seeing each other, but I kept coming to church because I was searching for something,” Amy admits. “I definitely wasn’t looking to change. It wasn’t my lesbian lifestyle that I was bringing to God, but I wondered if God had answers to my deeper longings. Problem was, I didn’t trust God at all!

“The more I listened and learned about the teachings of Jesus, the more I started to actually believe that God really did love me. I heard more and more about being his Masterpiece, and in time, I actually started to believe it. The more I believed God actually could see something of value in me, the more I trusted him.”

Over time, Amy slowly opened her heart and struggles to Christ. “It took several years, but as I moved closer and closer to Christ, he gently took me on a very surprising journey. First, I found out my father had nine affairs while I was growing up—a secret that rocked my world. Jesus began to show me how the roots of my sexual issues tie together with my dad’s—I was just like him, using people to find comfort, life, and love outside of God.”

Amy continued to grow in her knowledge of the Scriptures, falling more and more in love with the Lord. The following year, God had another surprise for her: “I went to the seminar called ‘To Be Told,’ hosted at Gateway. I wanted to see how God could put closure to my brokenness, but what he showed me shocked me,” Amy recalls.

“As Dan Allender was telling a story of a bully, I suddenly had a flashback of getting off the school bus. I lived down the street from Jimmy, a boy who had bullied me all year. But this particular day, Jimmy acted nice to me as I got off the bus,” Amy recalls.
“He apologized for being so mean, and he invited me to come to his house.”

That day in the seminar, all else faded to black as this vivid nightmare crept back to life. Amy saw herself walking through Jimmy’s front door, noticing all the shades pulled down. Startled, she spied two teenage boys eyeing her with a ravenous look as the door slammed shut. Her screams never escaped the evil darkness that enveloped that house. They pinned her down and raped her.

She was only nine!

Amy swam in a pool of tears as the seminar continued. Others were oblivious to her divine epiphany. She realized the Lord had been drawing her near to strengthen her for this revelation—to show her the source of so much sexual struggle hidden for years beneath layers of protective mud.

“After that, I realized God knows more about me than I know about myself,” Amy recalls, “and he wants to bring healing to these wounds, so I fully gave him my heart and body—everything. As I continued to seek intimacy with him, the lesbian struggles fell away. I’m not saying that’s how God works with everyone, but it’s how he’s healing me. The more I focus on God’s intimate love for me and try to see his Masterpiece emerge, the less I want anything to get in the way of his work in me.”

Seven years later, Amy leads our ministry to help people find healing and wholeness from all kinds of sexual and relational struggles. She’s helping others become God’s restored Masterpiece.

**Jesus Is Never Shocked**

Do you realize that Jesus is not shocked by the shocking things people do? Jesus knew Zacchaeus had robbed people blind and profited off much unethical behavior, yet Jesus was not shocked. He did not offer Zach correction, but relationship. “Come down, Zacchaeus. I’m staying at your house tonight” (see Luke 19:5). That shocked everyone! Yet relationship changed Zacchaeus.
Jesus knew that the Samaritan woman at the well had been married and divorced five times. He knew about her current “hookup” and how sexually entangled she was with the guy she was living with (John 4). Jesus was not repulsed. (Samaritans of Jesus’ day were treated by the religious community like gay people often get treated by some of today’s Christian community.) None of this kept Jesus away or kept him from offering her living water. Maybe Jesus wants Christ-followers who will be less like the Pharisees and more like him—unshockable.

Luke tells of a time Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner. Jesus and his disciples went and “reclined at the table” (Luke 7:36) along with Simon’s religious friends, who were skeptical about Jesus’ true identity—mainly because he showed more love for “sinners” than love for the Law of Moses (Jesus had just made it clear this wasn’t true; he came to fulfill the intent of the Law of Moses). They invited Jesus there to judge him, not learn from him.

Middle Eastern dining style consisted of a one-foot high table with pillows on the floor for seating, usually with feet stretched out to the side or behind them. As the meal proceeded, an immoral woman crashed the party. She sheepishly made her way over to stand behind Jesus. Luke makes sure we know she had “lived a sinful life” (v. 37). She did not just have a few slipups, but rather had made a life out of her sexual deviancies, and everyone knew it! Her mud was public knowledge. Her whole life, she had felt judged and condemned by the religious establishment, so to go into the house of her tormentors took enormous courage.

Yet there she stood . . . because Jesus was there! Somehow word on the street had traveled to her through the crowd she hung out with—there’s hope in Jesus for the muddiest human. Hearing he had come near, an unstoppable force welling up from within had drawn her to his feet. As she stood in his presence, hope burst through the dam of all that pain that had driven her mudslinging behavior—she started to cry. Her tears accidentally landed on Jesus’ dirty feet (that his host had not shown the common courtesy to wash).
The tension in the room mounted; everyone’s shoulders tightened as she fell to her knees behind Jesus, bent down, and wiped his wet, dirty feet with her hair. She took out a bottle of oil mixed with perfume, took the oil in her hands, and gently stroked his feet with the oil—kissing them as she anointed him with the perfume.

Jesus just sat there, never flinching, eyes fixed on the Pharisees, watching them react in shock and disbelief—flames of contempt shooting out of their merciless eyes.

Simon could stand it no more. This outrageous scene had proven his point. He muttered to himself and his “more respectable” guests, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39).

In other words, if Jesus were truly a prophet, he would know about her scandalous sexual sin, and he would be shocked. But Jesus did know and was not shocked!

Now you have to realize, this was a controversial situation. Imagine a known prostitute coming up to your pastor, kissing his feet and rubbing oil on them after the Sunday service. It would be his last Sunday at most churches if he didn’t put an end to it fast! What was Jesus thinking? Why didn’t this shock Jesus like it would all of us?

Jesus looks at the heart. It’s about the heart. Jesus confronted the unloving hearts of his host and friends while this woman demonstrated a heart overflowing with love. Jesus said, “Simon, I have something to tell you” (v. 40).

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii [a whole lot of money], and the other fifty [one tenth as much]. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. [The only thing Simon had judged correctly that day!]

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Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

Luke 7:41–47

It’s all about love! Don’t miss this very critical point Jesus makes to us all—if you truly recognize how much it cost God to forgive you, it will flood your heart with love for God and others who need more of the same. It’s all about love! Not a love that ignores the mud and the damage that destroys God’s Masterpiece, but a love that recognizes how much loving mercy God has given a messed up person like me! That great love brings grace and truth together to give hope to a broken world in need of forgiveness and restoration.

Jesus never ignores her sin (he speaks of “her many sins”), nor does he ignore the seemingly less expensive sins of the Pharisees (judgmental, ungrateful hearts that show no love or mercy, yet cost Jesus the same price to forgive—his life!). What Jesus does is point out that both this woman and the “good” religious people around the table owed a debt they couldn’t pay! Both could be forgiven that debt, but neither could pay.

In Jesus’ day, if you couldn’t pay your debt, you went to debtor’s prison or became a slave (Matthew 18:30). The predicament was the same for those who couldn’t pay a lot as those who couldn’t pay a little. Maybe the reason we get so shocked is that we don’t really feel grateful or in need of God’s grace in an equal way. In other words, we don’t see ourselves accurately. Therefore, we don’t experience the magnitude of God’s love and grace extended to us, so we don’t have much love or mercy in our hearts for those who need the same!
Unshockable

Is that you? Does your attitude resemble that of the Pharisees or that of Jesus? Are there certain kinds of people that you treat as irredeemable—too far gone? Do you secretly judge yourself as being a much better person than “those” people; therefore you owe God less debt? Do you realize you could not cover your debt, and neither can they, and Jesus’ point was really this—there’s no difference in you or others in need of forgiveness, except some realize it; others don’t; some are more grateful, others less grateful; some love more as a result, others love less.

Full of Shame

Jesus did not recoil in shock and disbelief at people’s relative “badness,” because he identified the person with the Masterpiece rather than the mud. The reason I believe Jesus wants his followers to be unshockable has nothing to do with hating sin or not hating sin. It has to do with seeing sin for what it is—it’s foreign matter. Sin is not our true identity—that’s the whole problem. We need to help people identify with God’s image in them.

Paul explained it this way: “It is no longer I myself who do [wrong], but it is sin living in me [i.e., sin is not me]” (Romans 7:17). When people identify themselves with the mud (which is not them), they act like mud! When people identify themselves with the Masterpiece God created them to be, they’re more willing to allow the Master to do his restoration work.

Shame tells us, “You equal your bad behaviors. You are the sum total of the things you’ve done that you’re not proud of. You are ugly and dirty and unworthy of love. You will never amount to anything of value—you’re mud.” The problem with shame is that it keeps us acting like mud, so we just keep wallowing in it, and dragging others through the mud with us. Jesus removes the shame of all willing people and identifies them as his treasured, beloved, adopted children who will be restored fully (Ephesians 2:3–5).
Helping people see “what kind” of people God created them to be can catalyze God’s restoration work in them!

A St. Lucian Kind of Person

The St. Lucia Parrot, one of the most strikingly beautiful birds in the world, was destined for extinction. By 1977, only one hundred of these exquisite birds remained on earth, all on the tiny Caribbean island of St. Lucia. The striking turquoise, lime green, and red beauty of the St. Lucia Parrot had been taken for granted, hunted, trapped, eaten, and their natural habitat decimated for decades. One biologist forecasted that the parrot “could not escape oblivion by the year 2000.”

That’s when Paul Butler, a twenty-one-year-old with no authority or money, took on the challenge to convince St. Lucia that they were the kind of people who protected their own. He did everything in his power to help the people see that “this parrot is ours. Nobody has this but us. We need to cherish it and look after it.” He hosted puppet shows, distributed T-shirts, cajoled bands into recording songs about the parrot, and asked ministers to preach about stewardship of the parrot. All focused on convincing St. Lucia that “we are the kind of people who care about our parrot.” And it worked! Rather than becoming extinct, the population of St. Lucia Parrots has grown over 600 percent since Butler started his Identity Campaign.1

Our view of “what kind” of people we are changes our behavior. The Pharisees identified the immoral woman by her mud. “If [Jesus] were a prophet, he would know . . . what kind of woman she is” (Luke 7:39, italics mine). What kind of a woman is she? They could only see the mud, so they treated her like dirt. Jesus saw what kind of woman she was created to be!

It’s an identity issue. Do you see the image of God in every person? Can you imagine God’s original intention for one life? That must have been what Jesus could see! He somehow helped

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people identify “what kind” of people God created them to be. The Pharisees did not have the spiritual vision to see what kind of woman she was created to be, so they inadvertently did the work of the destroyer, who keeps people enslaved to their sin by keeping them identified with sin. What kind of people are we? That’s a critical question. How do we see ourselves and others?

**Condemnation Is a Given**

All people grow up under the condemning voice of shame. We all feel it because apart from God’s grace, it’s the truth. People know deep down the words Paul penned, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?” (Romans 7:18–19, 24). Paul identified how shame drives us to feel wretched and condemned. What hope is there for me if this is the truth? People naturally feel this hopeless sense of judgment, so they run from God.

Apart from God’s grace, apart from knowing that God holds out hope that can restore the most damaged Masterpiece, people live feeling condemned. Identifying people with mud just pushes them farther away from the Master who can restore them.

Steve, an agnostic skeptic, had a very bad opinion of organized religion and really didn’t want to think about God or the claims of Jesus. His wife talked him into coming to our church, and as he started to understand God’s vision for his life, he emailed me his insight:

> Up ‘til now I have not wanted to think this much about God, because it would mean that I have to come to grips with all the wrong I have done in this world—all the people I may have hurt, all the bad things I have done, even the thoughts in my head. I don’t want to face that—I don’t want to know that—

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Seeing Through the Eyes of Jesus

don’t like that person. Why then am I so dead-set on staying that person? I want to be better, I don’t want to hurt people. I want to be rid of these desires to do bad things. I am not ready to deal with all of my past, but perhaps in time I can come to peace with what I have become. Anyhow, I think I am now ready to move forward and follow the path of God to be a better version of me.

Relationship Is the Solution

Can you hear the shame and condemnation that keeps driving people away from God’s restorative grace? Unless we, like Jesus, offer some really “good news” about God to offset this bad news that everyone secretly understands, people just keep running from him.

So we must be like Jesus. We must start where Jesus started, with muddied, wretched-feeling people. Jesus didn’t start with the mud, but the hope of this “good news” about a God of grace who offers damaged people a relationship to become the people they were intended to be (we all need that).

Think about it: Jesus didn’t confront Zacchaeus about his thieving practices, he offered relationship, and that changed Zach! Jesus didn’t make sure the woman at the well understood that sex outside of marriage is wrong (though he taught it was at other times), he offered her living water that made the muddy water distasteful. Jesus didn’t remind the woman caught in adultery that she broke the Ten Commandments—he didn’t have to—he set her free from condemnation so that she could “go and sin no more” (John 8:11 NLT). He offered a chance to live a new life! Relationship was Jesus’ solution to sin. Can we offer restorative relationship to very muddied people? That’s what it takes to be like Jesus!

Sunni glanced in the rearview mirror. Something about the innocent, big brown eyes smiling back at her from the car seat.
struck a deep chord in her soul. “She deserves better than I got,” Sunni thought. The bright, beautiful day contrasted vividly with her dark teenage memories of losing her mom to an overdose. Sunni had mostly stopped stripping for a living since her daughter was born, but kicking the alcohol and drugs did not come as easy.

“My beautiful little girl deserves more than an addicted mom in unhealthy relationships. How do I get out of this?” Sunni thought back over the men she’d been with, always hoping for a knight-in-shining-armor rescue. “I stay with men who are liars, manipulators, alcoholics, and cheaters because I’m so desperate to be loved by someone,” Sunni thought, “yet I always feel empty, like something’s missing.”

“Mommy, when can we go to church again?” Autum’s four-year-old voice cut through Sunni’s introspection. Having good memories of attending her aunt’s church as a kid, Sunni had tried church a year earlier. She always left feeling small, dirty, unworthy of God’s love, and like there was no way she could ever redeem herself in God’s eyes. And she knew if these people found out her past, they’d surely reject her.

“I don’t know, honey,” Sunni told Autum. Yet that very day, driving along listening to her favorite rock station, Sunni heard a radio ad that made her laugh. “It surprised me that it was a church,” Sunni recalls, “but what stuck in my mind were the last words: ‘Come as you are—no perfect people allowed.’”

Sundeos is a church we helped start in Oregon. Sean, the pastor, recalls meeting Sunni that Sunday. Sunni came once and felt like people were genuine and real, but past memories still haunted her: “Maybe they’re faking it,” she concluded. The people seemed fake and judgmental at the last church; she just expected the same here—especially if they knew her past. Two weeks later, Sunday morning found her so hungover her body shook from dehydration.

“‘Come as you are’ kept filling my mind,” Sunni recalls, “so I decided to put them to the test and see if they would push me out”—better sooner than later, she figured. Sean saw her come in, introduced himself as the pastor, and asked how she was doing.
“I have a massive hangover,” Sunni blurted out, intending to jolt a judgmental reaction.

“Oh, then you need some coffee,” Sean responded, “Can I get some for you?”

Sunni was shocked. She tried again and again with other people, working hard to get a reaction to her “massive hangover.” Instead, she felt like the people there were less concerned about her hangover than they were about her—it blew her away.

“I continued to come to Sundeos and began building amazing relationships with people there, and as trust built, I began to say less words for shock value (which was a defense mechanism I used to keep people from getting close enough to hurt me), and I began to allow myself to be ever-so-slightly vulnerable. Sean, Collette, Chandy, and a few other people brought me into their lives like I was family. No matter what I said or did, the response was, ‘I love you for exactly who you are, and exactly where you’re at, and so does Jesus.’ Nine months later, I almost overdosed like my mom had, but I cried out for help—this time to God and my new Christian friends.”

Sunni entered recovery to get clean of drugs and alcohol, and Sean baptized her for faith in Jesus. Today Sunni celebrates nearly four years of sobriety. “God led me to an amazing Christian man I’ve been married to for a year now, I’m back in college, and I know Autumn will have a better life than I did, because God’s leading us all.”

Jesus offered mercy to people who needed mercy. He brought good news about God’s heart for people who felt condemned, judged, thinking God saw no hope for them. He offered people relationship that restored. As followers of Jesus, do we first bring something “good” relationally to people in need of good news, or do we bring a gospel of mud-management that says, “Until they see the mud, they won’t see their need for God? Until I help them see the ‘bad news’ about how wrong their sin is, they won’t see their need for forgiveness”? Jesus didn’t do this, but the Pharisees did.
Unshockable

This doesn’t mean Jesus ignored or denied the seriousness of our sins against God or our wrongs against each other. Jesus didn’t deny the truth about sin (as we will see in coming chapters). Instead, he put the spotlight of grace on the Masterpiece, so people could see why the mud needed removing.

What would happen if you went into your workplace, your neighborhood, your home and really started treating people just like Jesus did? What if you were unshocked by mud . . . motivated by mercy . . . and committed to restoring value? We must learn to hold a new framework in our minds. God may need to chip away some of your rough spots to get you looking more like Jesus than a Pharisee. Will you let him? We must learn to replace shock with a mercy that restores value rather than devalues people. But how? Here’s a powerful truth you probably never thought much about: How you choose to see people matters more than what you say or do.

QUESTIONS AND ACTIONS

1. Reflect on this: Circle each “kind of person” you might feel uneasy or uncomfortable striking up a conversation with. Feel free to write in new categories that come to mind. Ask God to show you why you feel this way and why these categories could limit his work through you:
   a drug addict     a lesbian     a liberal     a conservative
   a Muslim     a Hindu     a Buddhist     a vocal Christian
   a gay couple     a convicted felon     a Wiccan     a stripper
   a convicted molester     a vocal atheist     someone of a different culture or ethnicity
   a “successful person”     a “beautiful” person     a person in a wheelchair     a troubled person
   Other _____________ _____________ _____________

2. Try this: Look for people to interact with this week who make you uncomfortable or seem very different than you. Again, just ask questions about what they like to do or what was the most...