

BOB GOFF

**EVERYBODY
ALWAYS**

BECOMING LOVE in a
WORLD FULL *of* SETBACKS
and DIFFICULT PEOPLE



NELSON
BOOKS

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I've spent my whole life trying to make my faith easy. The truth is, it's not. From what I've been reading, if we do it right, it will actually kill all the earlier versions of us. What I'm trying to do now is make my faith simple.

This book is dedicated to everyone who has helped my friends and me make faith increasingly simple. These people haven't tried to save up love like they're going to need it later; they know we're rivers, not reservoirs. It's also a really long thank-you note to everyone who has ever done something nice for Sweet Maria, for one of my kids, or for someone they love. When you've done it for them, you've done it for me. I know God feels the same way.



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PROLOGUE

I wrote a book called *Love Does* a few years ago. We took all the money from the book and opened schools and safe houses, homes for abandoned infants, and orphanages in Somalia, Uganda, Iraq, Nepal, and other countries where regional conflicts have endangered the children living there. It was my first shot at writing a book, and I tried to tell stories of some things I've learned about the immense power love has in the world. There was supposed to be a second book, but it was never published. This is my third book. Let me tell you why.

A number of years ago, a friend of mine quit the megachurch he pastored in Southern California and moved to the inner city of San Francisco. He wanted to build a community among people who had experienced tremendous failures and setbacks. He's a humble guy, is generous with his time, loves his family, and really loves God. Rather than spend only a few minutes each week with the thousands of people at the big church he pastored for years, he decided to go deep with a small number of people who had faced some tough breaks. He and a few friends started a restaurant staffed by guys who needed

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a fresh start and also a home for women who have confronted some of life's biggest challenges with courage and hope.

These amazing people spend their free time loving people in the housing projects near the restaurant. They give away love like they're made of it. Like my friend, they do this because they have developed completely unrealistic ideas about what their faith can do in the world when it's expressed in love. They decided to spend more time loving people than trying to game the system by just agreeing with Jesus. You see, they wanted to follow Jesus' example; instead of telling people what Jesus meant, they just loved people the way He did.

The housing projects are difficult places. They're dark and scary and filled with beautiful, scary people. They are full of guns and violence and fights and theft. They are also full of love and compassion and generosity and hope.

These brave men and women from the restaurant seek out people who have felt forgotten and overlooked. They pursue the wrongdoers and disadvantaged and discouraged, and they love them Jesus-style—with extravagant grace.

On one of the trips to see my friend in San Francisco, I brought a couple of people who work with me. We flew in, rented a van, and headed over to the restaurant to see how we could help. We had been inside washing dishes for about thirty minutes when I went outside to get something out of the van. I was drop-jawed at what I found. All the windows were shattered, pieces of glass scattered on the seats and floorboards. Thieves in the neighborhood had broken in. All our luggage was gone. Oh, and our wallets, cell phones, and laptop computers too.

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I had just finished writing the first draft of this book, and it was on my stolen computer. Get this: the manuscript wasn't backed up. (Who needs iCloud? It costs ninety-nine cents a month.) Minor oversight on my part. I had to write the book all over again.

The good news was that I had been thinking about this book's idea for a while. A few years earlier, I had been with some dear friends at a large church in Chicago and gave a sermon where I said we need to love everybody, always. It made sense to me, so I decided to write a book about it.

It's hard to believe Jesus loves the van thieves and all the difficult people we've met just the same as you and me. Yet, the incredible message Love came to earth to give was that we're all tied for first in God's mind. While we're still trying to get our arms around this idea, God doesn't want us to just study Him like He's an academic project. He wants us to become love.

I've heard it's hard to write a good second book and that they usually stink. The thieves probably did us all a favor, so let's just call this my third book. It's given me a lot of comfort knowing we're all rough drafts of the people we're still becoming. I hope this second version of the book moves the needle in a way that reaffirms the power of extravagant love and excessive grace in your life and in the world.



CHAPTER 1

Creepy People

*We don't need to be who we used to
be; God sees who we're becoming—
and we're becoming love.*

My friends and I finished what we were doing at the restaurant and took the windowless van back to the airport. We pulled into the rental lot looking a little windblown, and the attendant stared at us with a puzzled expression. “It looked like this when we got it,” I told him nonchalantly. Walking away, I tossed the keys to him. I felt like the guy in the movies when he throws a match over his shoulder and the car explodes behind him. Pro tip: If you do throw the match, make sure you don’t turn around and look when it blows up. It wrecks the vibe.

I was disappointed everything was stolen, but I figured it would all work out. What I didn’t realize was how hard it would be to get back on an airplane to fly home with no identification. I got to the front of the security line, and the guy with a badge asked for

my ticket and ID. I reached in my pockets and turned them inside out. I had nothing. I shrugged my shoulders pathetically and said, “Man, it all got stolen. My luggage, my wallet, everything.” I felt like Jason Bourne.

The TSA guy wasn’t very sympathetic. I could understand. He was just doing his job. He asked if there was any way I could prove who I was. I shook my head, then suddenly remembered—I had written a book a while ago. We Googled it, but I forgot the cover only had balloons on it. (I made a mental note to put a huge photo of myself on the cover of this book just in case it happens again, but I bailed on the idea when I saw what my face looked like on a book cover.)

All of this raised a question I’ve been thinking about a lot lately. *How do we prove who we are?* I don’t mean who our driver’s licenses say we are or what our careers suggest about who we are or who we tell other people we are or who they tell us we are. Jesus talked to His friends a lot about how we should identify ourselves. He said it wouldn’t be what we said we believed or all the good we hoped to do someday. Nope, He said we would identify ourselves simply by how we loved people. It’s tempting to think there is more to it, but there’s not. Love isn’t something we fall into; love is someone we become.

It’s easy to love kind, lovely, humble people. I mean, who wouldn’t? These are the ones I’ve spent much of my life loving. Loving the people who are easy to love made me feel like I was really good at it. Because the people I loved were kind and wonderful, they made sure they told me what a great job I was

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doing loving them. What I've come to realize, though, is that I was avoiding the people I didn't understand and the ones who lived differently than me. Here's why: some of them creeped me out. Sure, I was polite to them, but sadly, I've spent my whole life avoiding the people Jesus spent His whole life engaging. God's idea isn't that we would just give and receive love but that we could actually *become love*. People who are becoming love see the beauty in others even when their off-putting behavior makes for a pretty weird mask. What Jesus told His friends can be summed up in this way: He wants us to love everybody, always—and start with the people who creep us out. The truth is, we probably creep them out as much as they do us.

Are there people you should give a wide berth to? You bet. There are people in my life and yours who are unsafe, toxic, and delight in sowing discord wherever they go. God gave us discernment, and we should use it as we live our lives. He's also given us love and understanding and kindness and the ability to forgive, which have power we often leave untapped. There's a difference between good judgment and living in judgment. The trick is to use lots of the first and to go a little lighter on the second.

What I'm learning about love is that we have to tackle a good amount of fear to love people who are difficult. Oftentimes, when I encounter someone who makes me feel afraid, I instantly put up barriers. I put them up with my big words and opinions. I construct them to protect myself. Barriers make me feel right, and that makes me feel safe. I think this is something we all do to some degree, and there's no shame in that. Except it's not what Jesus did.

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He showed us what it means to become love when He spent His last meal with a man who He knew would betray Him and then willingly died a criminal's death.

We make loving people a lot more complicated than Jesus did. Every time I try to protect myself by telling somebody about one of my opinions, God whispers to me and asks about my heart. *Why are you so afraid? Who are you trying to impress?* Am I really so insecure that I surround myself only with people who agree with me? When people are flat wrong, why do I appoint myself the sheriff to straighten them out? Burning down others' opinions doesn't make us right. It makes us arsonists.

God's endgame has always been the same. He wants our hearts to be His. He wants us to love the people near us and love the people we've kept far away. To do this, He wants us to live without fear. We don't need to use our opinions to mask our insecurities anymore. Instead, God wants us to grow love in our hearts and then cultivate it by the acre in the world. We'll become in our lives what we do with our love. Those who are becoming love don't throw people off roofs; they lower people through them instead.



In high school, someone asked me if I had “met Jesus.” I thought he was kidding. “Of course not,” I answered literally. I still haven't. I don't have any friends who have either. From what I've read, very few people on this side of heaven have actually ever met God. Adam and Eve did. Joseph and Mary did too. Moses did on the top of a mountain. Some shepherds and a few wise men make the list. A boatful of

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fishermen, a couple of thieves on a hill. There were plenty of others, but not as many as you might think.

By contrast, there were a lot of people who watched Jesus from a distance. He walked their streets and went to their parties. He stood before leaders, and a few even saw Him raised up on a cross. I suppose they could say they met Him, but at best, they probably just got a glimpse of Him. For a long time, I saw Jesus from a distance and thought we'd met. It still happens to me every time I avoid people God made in His own image just because I don't understand them. My fear of them leaves me only with glimpses of Jesus. What I've come to realize is if I really want to "meet Jesus," then I have to get a lot closer to the people He created. All of them, not just some of them.

God could have made it otherwise, of course, and everyone could have actually met Jesus. He could have appeared in person throughout history in all maternity wards and huts and fields where children are born. He could have shown up at Super Bowl games and Taylor Swift concerts and at elementary school plays and the Rose Parade. By not doing this, I don't think He's avoiding us. I think His plan all along has been for us to meet the people He made and feel like we just met Him.

In this sense, I've met God almost every day. Certainly, God wants us to learn about Him by reading the letters and stories collected in the Bible, but He also wants us to meet Him by loving the people who are difficult to get along with. If I'm only willing to love the people who are nice to me, the ones who see things the way I do, and avoid all the rest, it's like reading every other page of the Bible and thinking I know what it says.

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Jesus told His friends if they wanted to be like Him, they needed to love their neighbors and they needed to love difficult people. This sounds so familiar that I'm tempted to just agree with Jesus and move on, but Jesus doesn't want us merely to agree with Him. In fact, I can't think of a single time He gathered His friends around Him and said, "Guys, I just want you to agree with Me." He wants us to do what He said, and He said He wants us to love everybody, always.

Jesus said to love our enemies. I thought I'd get off easy because I don't have any real "enemies." I mean, I'm not mad at North Korea or Russia or China. And I don't think they're mad at me. After all, I wrote a book and put balloons on the cover. Who could be mad at that guy? I think Jesus meant something different when He said "enemies." He meant we should love the people we don't understand. The ones we disagree with. The ones who are flat wrong about more than a couple of things. I have plenty of those people in my life, and my bet is you do too. In fact, I might be one of those people sometimes.

I think God allows all of us to go missing a time or two. He doesn't lose us like I did my computer when my van was broken into, but He lets us get lost for a while if it's what we really want. When we do, He doesn't pout or withhold His love the way I probably would if someone completely ignored me or walked away from me. Instead, He pursues us in love. He's not trying to find us; He always knows where we are. Rather, He goes *with* us as we find ourselves again. In this way, we have both a little sheep and some shepherd in us too. God isn't constantly telling us what to do



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as we search for ourselves either. He gently reminds us who we are. He continues to rewrite our lives the way I rewrote my book—in beautiful and unexpected ways, knowing the next version of us will usually be better than the previous one.



As a lawyer, I win arguments for a living, but something has changed within me. I want to be Jesus. I've concluded we can be correct and not right. Know what I mean? I do this most often when I have the right words and the wrong heart. Sadly, whenever I make my opinions more important than the difficult people God made, I turn the wine back into water. I'm trying to resist the bait that darkness offers me every day to trade kindness for rightness. These are not mutually exclusive ideas, of course, but there's a big difference between being kind and being right. Pick the most controversial social issue of the day, and you'll find passionate voices on all sides. The sad fact is, many of us have lost our way trying to help people find theirs. Arguments won't change people. Simply giving away kindness won't either. Only Jesus has the power to change people, and it will be harder for them to see Jesus if their view of Him is blocked by our big opinions.

I used to think we'd be known for whom we hung around, the groups or social issues we identified with, or the faith tradition we were familiar with. Now I think while we might be known for our opinions, we'll be remembered for our love. What I've learned following Jesus is we only really find our identities by engaging the

people we've been avoiding. Jesus wrapped up this concept in three simple and seemingly impossible ideas for us to follow: love Him, love your neighbor, and love your enemies.

I want to love God more fully. I really do. Who wouldn't? I want to love my neighbors too. Why not? I live next door to some of them. Overall, they are kind of like me. But love my enemies? Sure, I'll tolerate them for a while. I might even be nice to them for a couple of minutes. But *love* them? Yikes.

In the simplest terms, Jesus came to earth and declared He would turn God's enemies into His friends. He didn't do it with twenty-dollar words or lectures or by waving a bony finger at people who had made mistakes. He convinces us with love, and He does it without fear or shame. He doesn't raise His voice and shout over the noise in our lives. He lets the power of love do all the talking for Him. We have the same shot in other people's lives every day.

Loving each other is what we were meant to do and how we were made to roll. It's not where we start when we begin following Jesus; it's the beautiful path we travel the rest of our lives. Will it be messy and ambiguous and uncomfortable when we love people the way Jesus said to love them? You bet it will. Will we be misunderstood? Constantly. But extravagant love often means coloring outside the lines and going beyond the norms. Loving the neighbors we don't understand takes work and humility and patience and guts. It means leaving the security of our easy relationships to engage in some tremendously awkward ones.

Find a way to love difficult people more, and you'll be living the life Jesus talked about. Go find someone you've been avoiding

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and give away extravagant love to them. You'll learn more about God, your neighbor, your enemies, and your faith. Find someone you think is wrong, someone you disagree with, someone who isn't like you at all, and decide to love that person the way you want Jesus to love you.

We need to love everybody, always.

Jesus never said doing these things would be easy. He just said it would work.