

A LIFE BEYOND AMAZING

*9 DECISIONS THAT WILL
TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE TODAY*

DR. DAVID JEREMIAH



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A Life Beyond Amazing
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*To David and Barbara Green.
Your lives are beyond amazing.*

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INTRODUCTION

At two o'clock on Sunday afternoon, January 8, 2017, a giant fell to the earth, causing the ground to tremble like a palsied hand. One of the best-known giant sequoias, the Pioneer Cabin Tree, collapsed amid California storms. Pioneer Cabin, so named because its hollowed interior was big enough for a home, had pointed upward a thousand years. She was majestic to behold. But her core was gone, her limbs were brittle, her roots were shallow, and only a few branches still clung to life. When lashed by wind and water, the big tree tottered and tumbled and shattered on impact. Her millennium was over.

Many of us are also teetering and tottering, never knowing when the next storm will come. We want to be rooted and solid—a testimony to our Creator. But often we feel hollow, shallow rooted, with no strong core.

What if I told you that you can change all this, that you can weather the storms of life with an inner strength and confidence you've imagined but never felt? What if I told you that you can experience the kind of joy that will change the world around you, and the kind of peace that brings serenity and calmness sweeter than any you've known?

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And what if I told you the cost for achieving all of this is free, available to all, and that this special offer will never expire?

Interested?

In this book I share with you how to achieve all that I have described and more. In these pages I show you the path to a life beyond amazing.

No matter who you are, how old, how rich or poor, how tired, disappointed, lonely, or hopeless—you can follow this path. No matter what difficulty and pain life has dealt you, or what riches and opportunities you feel it hasn't, this path is for you.

This book is about character. It's about how we develop the character that Christ wants for us, that God makes us capable of achieving, and that the Holy Spirit is always, always ready to guide us to. I want to help you develop character qualities beyond the norm. I want to show you how to build a life beyond amazing, and, in so doing, make an impact beyond imagination.

SET FEAR ASIDE

You don't need fear anymore. You need new hope, new strength, and new understanding. You need a fresh start on a new path.

And what does our world need? Our world needs solid-to-the-core people with unimpaired grit and unimpeded godliness. The church needs a rekindling of the nine traits that go to the core of character and are called the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5:22–23. God wants us to be people of love and joy and peace. He wants to build endurance into our lives and instill in us compassion for those who need our help. He is ready to bestow the qualities of champions—generosity, integrity, humility, and self-discipline.

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People with those qualities are saints for all seasons.

They are people like Jesus.

This book is a manual on how to develop these qualities. You alone can make the decision to pursue this life, and if you do, I promise you will not be alone. Not ever.

The qualities of a life beyond amazing are produced within us by the Holy Spirit. It is His love, joy, peace, endurance, compassion, generosity, integrity, humility, and self-discipline you seek. These qualities represent the essence of the personality of Jesus Himself. When the Spirit of Christ comes to live within us, He reproduces Himself, putting these traits at our core so we can achieve godly character. Our first step, then, is our commitment to Christ and our willingness to grow in understanding of how the Holy Spirit works in us.

IT'S UP TO YOU

This is a life-changing choice. Yes, you will have almighty help, but the work will still be up to you. These nine qualities require commitment and effort. Think of them as representing nine decisions that will transform your life if you take them seriously. And if you do take them seriously, you will start a journey that will not leave you as the same person you are today.

The same Bible that describes love as a fruit of the Spirit also commands us to love one another, to clothe ourselves with love, and to walk in love. The same New Testament that calls joy a by-product of the Spirit also tells us to rejoice in the Lord always and to be of good cheer.

Lots of extra joy doesn't sound so difficult, does it? Plenty of

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love to fill your heart and your life is the kind of commitment you're more than ready to make, right?

That depends. None of what I will share with you is beyond your reach . . . unless you try it alone, without the spiritual support Jesus makes available to us. That spiritual support will sustain you when what I'm asking you to do feels like more than you can handle, much less achieve. I will tell you how to access that support and how you will be uplifted for any challenge when you do. Because if you take this path and do this work, you will have help. Not just any help, you will have the help of the Holy Spirit every step of the way. And nothing, truly nothing, is more powerful than that.

In John 10:10, the Lord said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." The abundant life is solid to the core, fruitful to the end, and amazing to experience. It is the biblical norm for God's people.

In Philippians 2:13, we read: "*It is God who works in you* both to will and to do for His good pleasure." The development of character is a joint effort by our Savior and ourselves, and it is part and parcel of the abundant life.

Why, then, are we living beneath the norm?

Why is there such a gap between what Christ wants us to be and what we are?

THREE REASONS WE STRUGGLE

Sometimes it's because we misunderstand the nature of salvation.

Salvation is one of the Bible's great words, but many don't understand that the Bible presents salvation in three stages. The moment we truly receive Christ as Savior and Lord, we are instantly

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and eternally saved from the *penalty* of sin. During our Christian life spans on earth, we're gradually being saved from the *power* of sin and should grow in godliness. One day in heaven, we will be saved from the very *presence* of sin and will be wholly glorified.

Many people consider salvation a onetime, past event. They forget its ongoing nature.

N. T. Wright wrote:

Many Christians . . . have a big gap in their vision of what being a Christian is all about. It's as though they were standing on one side of a deep, wide river, looking across to the further bank. On *this* bank you declare your faith. On the *opposite* bank is the ultimate result—final salvation itself. But what are people supposed to do in the meantime? Simply stand here and wait? Is there no bridge between the two? . . .

The bridge in question goes by many names. . . . But one of the most obvious names is *character*. . . . the transforming, shaping, and marking of a life and its habits.¹

From the first step of that process to our last breath, we are crossing this bridge. Throughout our lives, we develop our character consciously or unconsciously. In your journey to a life beyond amazing, you will learn to develop your character in ways that bring remarkable rewards.

There's a second reason people miss the abundant life: they misapply the concept of works. Many biblical passages teach that we're not saved by our own efforts but by the grace of God alone. But the same passages also tell us good works are an essential evidence of the salvation experience.

For example, Ephesians 2:8–9 says, “For by grace you have been

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saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” Hallelujah for that!

But the next verse says, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

Hallelujah for that too! We are not saved *by* good works, but *for* good works. God saves us and leaves us on earth for a span so we can serve Him here, letting our light shine before others, so they can see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).

If you choose to take the path I will show you, this understanding will be a blessing. Again and again we will discuss what you can actually *do* to achieve this new life. It begins with God’s grace, and it is sustained by His grace as you shape your character by what you do as you cross the bridge.

A third reason we fail to develop godly character involves a mistaken view of spirituality. Some believe we have little or no role in our own Christian maturity. God does everything, they think, and we simply have to “let go and let God.” After all, if it’s the “fruit of the Spirit,” we should passively let Him work within us as we abide in Christ.

It’s true the Holy Spirit alone can reproduce the character of our Lord Jesus, and we must always abide in Christ. But the Bible also makes us active partners in the process, and we must be diligent to do our part. “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Diligent is not a word for the fainthearted. It implies consistency, self-discipline, making every effort, and working with great conscientiousness.

Bono, the lead singer of U2, described his experience of spiritual growth like this:

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Your nature is a hard thing to change; it takes time. . . . I have heard of people having life-changing, miraculous turn-arounds, people set free from addiction after a single prayer, relationships saved where both parties “let go, and let God.” But it was not like that for me. For all that “I was lost, I am found,” it is probably more accurate to say, “I was really lost. I’m a little less so at the moment.” And then a little less and a little less again. That to me is the spiritual life. The slow reworking and rebooting of a computer at regular intervals, reading the small print of the service manual. It has slowly rebuilt me in a better image. It has taken years, though, and it is not over yet.²

Bono is saying his spiritual progress since conversion has taken time and effort to achieve. He’s also saying that his work isn’t done yet, and he has no expectation of perfection anytime soon.

God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. And He has given us the indwelling strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The rest is up to us.

Peter says, “Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love” (2 Peter 1:5–7).

PARTNERING WITH GOD

As I pondered this, I came across a short essay that made it all as practical as putting on our shoes or rolling up our sleeves. Pat Goggins wrote:

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I describe Character as the only thing that goes in the casket with you. It's the only thing you take with you to the hereafter. . . .

Character is returning extra change at the grocery store. Character is keeping appointments and being on time, honoring your commitments and honoring your word. Character is choosing the harder right instead of the easier wrong. Character is setting priorities that honor God, family, country, and then career.

Character in marriage is working through the tough times. . . . Character is being committed to the well-being of your family and friends, associates, and others, even if it is personally costly; and yes, Character is setting a good example.

A married person of Character acts married all the time. A person of Character is self-disciplined and self-controlled. Character implies the courage to stand for what is right, if necessary, all alone to oppose what is wrong and to make the effort to discern the difference. Character is being truthful in all things while being sensitive to the fact that sometimes the truth hurts and need not be spoken.³

Do you want to be a person like that? I'm sure you do, and so do I. That's the way we should be whenever we enter a room, go to a meeting, compete in a game, hug our spouses, tuck our children into bed, get on an airplane, check into a hotel, make a purchase, or react to adversity.

That's what God desires for us too. He wants us to be trees that never topple, giants that never fall, people who bear enduring fruit. The Bible says:

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD,
And whose hope is the LORD.

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For he shall be like a tree planted by the waters,
Which spreads out its roots by the river,
And will not fear when heat comes;
But its leaf will be green,
And will not be anxious in the year of drought,
Nor will cease from yielding fruit.” (Jer. 17:7–8)

The ninefold fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 is a gift of God, but don't forget: it also represents nine decisions on your part. Those decisions will affect you every day; they will transform you into a person of character who fulfills your God-given potential and inspires others to do the same.

It's amazing to meet people like that.

It's beyond amazing to be one.

CHAPTER 1

A LIFE OF LOVE

*Love is not about what we feel for others—
it's about what we do for others.*

Who gets married on a Tuesday?

That's what family and friends of Kim and Scotti Madison wondered when they opened their invitations to the couple's Tuesday wedding. But to Kim and Scotti, it made perfect sense.

Kim lived in Nashville, where she'd raised her five children after a tough divorce. Scotti, also divorced, traveled to Nashville on business. Friends introduced them, and from the day they met, they shared a commitment to taking things slowly and making sure any relationship that developed would be prayerfully considered.

“When I was navigating the dating world after my divorce, my pastor said, ‘Kim, the right man for you is the one who would be serving the homeless whether you are there or not,’” Kim recalled.

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Sure enough, the night Scotti traveled to Nashville to ask Kim to consider dating him seriously was also the night she'd committed to overseeing midweek worship at the Nashville Women's Mission. She said yes to the date, on the condition that Scotti join her at the mission. And, she added, since he'd be coming anyway, would he be her guest speaker?

Scotti agreed, and that night he spoke from his heart to the women about losing his son to heroin and about living a strong life in the aftermath of such a tragedy.

"I heard his heart for Jesus, and I saw his desire to serve others," Kim said. "I knew that night God wanted us to be together."

Not long after that night, they were invited to volunteer at the Bridge Ministry, a thirteen-year-old ministry serving the homeless under the Jefferson Street Bridge in Nashville.

"This was a sector of our society I used to look through and around," Scotti says. "Now I look into the eyes and souls of those who are hurting. Jesus said, 'They will know you by your love.' Serving, listening, hugging, and praying with these special people alongside Kim is where I am the happiest and most fulfilled."

By Christmas, Scotti made it clear he wanted to marry Kim, and she felt the same way about him. Over the following month, the couple prayed about God's timing for the wedding and the details. Of course, Nashville offered plenty of beautiful venues, and there were a number of Fridays and Saturdays that would have worked just fine.

But that's not what God showed them. Both Kim and Scotti felt the Lord showed them the same location and time: under the Jefferson Street Bridge, on a Tuesday night, when they could celebrate with and serve the homeless.

"It was a real destination wedding," Scotti says, smiling. "And we shared it with our special guests—those whom Jesus wanted

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invited to the wedding banquet: ‘the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.’”

“We’d reached a point in our lives where we recognized Christ’s love is centered around serving,” Kim adds. “We wanted our friends and family to know and hear, ‘This is who we are. Will you now serve alongside us?’”

And so, on May 9, 2017, they gathered with their guests, including more than two hundred of their homeless friends. Everyone enjoyed an amazing meal, a worship service and a heartfelt ceremony. Knowing that to the homeless a slice of wedding cake meant they were truly guests who mattered, Kim and Scotti made sure everyone had all the wedding cake they wanted. When Kim and Scotti were pronounced man and wife, they went down every aisle and greeted their guests individually.

No one who attended that wedding left unmoved or unchanged. Why? Because Kim and Scotti took the love that filled their hearts when they served the homeless, and they gave it back—bestowing it abundantly and permanently on every one of their wedding guests.

WHAT IS LOVE?

Is there a more complex word than *love*? I don’t think so. We talk about loving God, loving football, loving pizza, receiving love, giving love, and making love. At church we sing about the love of God that’s “greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell.”

Then we get in the car and head home, radio on, listening to songs about love: selfish and self-centered love; one-sided, hopeless love; deceit and cruelty masquerading as love; and once in a while, a mature, other-centered love that stands the test of time.

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No wonder we take the word *love* for granted! We're obsessed with it, yet rarely do we witness or hear what love truly is in the world around us.

If true love is so unfamiliar, why do people write, talk, text, and sing about it so much?

Because there's a hole in the human heart. We're desperate for the experience of genuine love. Within intimate relationships and in our daily interactions with others, every one of us needs reassurance, affection, and fellowship—all forms of love. Love is oxygen for the soul; we have to have it. The first thing an infant needs at birth is to be held tenderly, to literally feel loved. This manifestation of love brings a lifetime of blessings.

The Bible has a lot to say about love. In the New International Version of the Bible, the word *love* occurs 567 times. From the book of Genesis to the book of Revelation, the story of the Bible is the story of God's unconditional and relentless love for mankind. Love is the foundation of everything good, which is why I chose it to be the first chapter in this book. Quite simply, love is what makes every other part of a life beyond amazing possible.

The love that appears at the top of almost every list of virtues in the Bible is not just God's love for us, but also our love for one another. To become a Christian means the very love of God is poured into your heart; it grows within you just as grapes grow on a vine, for the fruit of the Spirit is love.

This love isn't just a spiritual sensation. This love wears work gloves and handles the everyday nuts and bolts of life. It's highly practical. It hugs the lonely, feeds the hungry, tends the sick, comforts the sorrowful, and puts up with the insufferable. It is kind and long-suffering, pure and perceptive, positive in outlook. It is truly the key ingredient of a life beyond amazing.

THE HIGHEST FORM OF LOVE

Until Jesus came to earth, this kind of love was unknown. The world's concept of love was self-centered, love that demanded something in return. But when God sent His Son as a love-gift to this world, His special, other-centered love was put on display for all to see. And this love was so different from anything anyone had seen before that it was given a special name. They called it *agape*.

Agape is unconditional, divine love, the kind of love God exercises toward mankind. At the heart of *agape* is sacrifice. It is not the spontaneous, impulsive love we see on television and in the movies. It is the reasoning, esteeming, and choosing type of love. *Agape* is the highest form of love—the love everyone wants to receive but few seem ready to give because of the sacrifice involved.

Most of us know the story of *Beauty and the Beast*, but you may not have considered the kind of love it describes. The eighteenth-century fairy tale tells of a handsome young prince made ugly by a fairy after he refused hospitality to her during a storm. Trapped in the form of a hideous beast, he lives alone, desperate to avoid the disgust on the faces of those who see him. The Beast can only be restored to his original form if someone loves him truly, in spite of his horrible appearance. One day Beauty appears and, ultimately, offers him that kind of redeeming, transforming love.

G. K. Chesterton wrote that the great lesson of *Beauty and the Beast* is that “a thing must be loved before it is lovable.”¹

This is a wonderful, familiar example of God's *agape*—the highest form of love. We are made unlovely by our sin, yet God's love sees beneath it the person He created. When we open ourselves to His love, it transforms us back into what we were meant to be.

One of the best definitions of *agape* I've ever heard is this: “It is

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the power to move us toward another person with no expectation of reward.”²

Wouldn't it be amazing if Christians were as obsessed with God's brand of love as society is obsessed with the world's concept of love? In this chapter we will learn much about God's love for us, and we will see how God's love for us is the key to our loving one another.

THE COMMAND TO LOVE

I heard about a teenager who was asked what she thought love was and she answered, “Love is a feeling you feel when you feel that what you feel is a feeling you never felt before.” That's how most of us think of love. As a feeling. A feeling is something that just happens to us, brought on by circumstances beyond our control. We can't help who we love—and, by extension, who we *don't* love.

But in the Bible, love is not just a feeling. It's not just one option among many. It's a command. Jesus says: “A new *commandment* I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34) and “This is My *commandment*, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12).

Over and over in the New Testament, God's people are commanded to love, in different contexts and different settings, and as parents, children, and individuals. And on thirteen occasions Christians are commanded to “love one another.” Why is that? We shouldn't have to be commanded to love our brothers and sisters in Christ; it should just come naturally, right? And who would really know if we *didn't* love one another? Of course, God would know, but the Bible tells us that the world will also know: “By this all will

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know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

The world is watching us, waiting to see if this Jesus thing really makes a difference. And when the world senses hypocrisy, it will pounce.

How do we know if we’re truly loving one another? Because love is not about what we *feel* for others—it’s about what we *do* for others. The true power of love is found in selfless attitudes and actions that seek the best for another person without expecting anything in return. When we act in that way, the feeling of love follows close behind.

When the apostle John records Jesus’ indictment against the church in Ephesus in Revelation 2, we see this concept at work: “Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (v. 4).

This dynamic, first-century church had started out with such passion for the Lord Jesus and such determination to make a difference in their city. Along the way, something happened. Their passion diminished, and they developed indifference toward the Lord and His purposes for their lives.

What solution did Jesus offer? Among other things, He told them to go back and “do the first works” (v. 5). They were told to return to the actions of their early experience, and in doing so they would recover their passion. In other words, *act* as though they were filled with passion for the Lord, *act* as if they were determined to make a difference in their city through the love of Jesus Christ.

The world constantly tells us to follow our hearts. What they really mean is to follow our feelings. But God’s kind of love—*agape*—doesn’t follow. It leads by example. Love is a verb. It acts. It leads our hearts and changes lives.

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In his book *Caring and Commitment*, Lewis Smedes told the story of James Ettison's love for his wife, Alice:

They got married, and settled snugly . . . into happiness. But about two years later, on a cold November night before the snow had come, Alice's car skidded on a stretch of ice that had formed unnoticed beneath a bridge on a two-way stretch of highway, and she ran head on, full speed, into a car coming from the other direction.

Alice survived. After tilting toward death for a year, she gave signs of living again, and she did. But she was never the same. She was all but paralyzed from the hips downward. Her memory was spotty and selective, and she uttered sounds that James had to learn to translate the way a person learns a new language. As months slithered into years, the past crept back with fits and starts into Alice's memory, which, in some ways, made life harder for her, because then she became that much more conscious of her other handicaps. She bore them like a smiling angel most of the time, but unpredictably, out of the blue, she sometimes, for weeks on end, was smothered by depression.

James quit his traveling job right after the accident, got some work near home, and made a nearly full-time vocation of taking care of Alice. . . . Nobody ever heard a discouraging word from his corner. . . .

Alice died fifteen years or so after that one terrible November night, and somebody asked James how he had done it all so patiently when he had gotten such a poor smidgen of everything he had hoped Alice would give to him. He said he had never thought to ask, though he had sometimes asked God why Alice was stuck with living and got nothing back from it.

But, pressed a little, he said it: "I just loved her."³

A GIFT THAT REQUIRES HARD WORK

The concept of love poses a major question for those of us who follow Christ. Is this love a gift from God we receive when we experience salvation, or is it something we're responsible for developing after we believe? The answer to both questions is yes. Yes, this love is a gift from God, imparted to us by the Holy Spirit:

- “The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5).
- “For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7).

And yes, Christians are called to cultivate love with determination and diligence.

Paul summarized his description of love in 1 Corinthians 13 with this: “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13). Because of the chapter divisions we find in our modern Bibles (added in the thirteenth century for ease of use), we assume at this point that Paul has finished his discussion of love, but he hasn't.

The first words of chapter 14?

“Pursue love.”

Two simple words summarize one of the toughest assignments we're given as followers of Christ:

Loving people is about the most difficult thing that some of us do. We can be patient with people and even just and charitable, but how are we supposed to conjure up in our hearts that warm, effervescent sentiment of goodwill which the New Testament

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calls “love”? Some people are so miserably unlovable. That odorous person with the nasty cough who sat next to you in the train, shoving his newspaper into your face, those crude louts in the neighborhood with the barking dog, that smooth liar who took you in so completely last week—by what magic are you supposed to feel toward these people anything but revulsion, distrust and resentment, and justified desire to have nothing to do with them?⁴

But the command is not ambiguous. We are called to love. “Here we have a prime example of that seeming paradox that stands at the center of the Christian life. . . . the fruit is always a gift, but it still requires hard work.”⁵

Since love is both a gift and a task, what is the work we need to do if we desire to live this life beyond amazing? How can we become more loving people?

PURSUE GENUINE LOVE

Henry Drummond preached a classic message on love, titled “The Greatest Thing in the World,” in which he said, “If a piece of ordinary steel is attached to a magnet and left there, after a while the magnetism of the magnet passes into the steel so that it too becomes a magnet.”⁶ As we stay attached to Jesus, His love will pass into us and out to others.

When we receive God’s love into our hearts, it creates a reservoir of love we can draw from when we need to love someone. In other words, we love others with the same love with which we ourselves have been loved!

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That reservoir of love is pure, and when we “do the first things” and act as if we love, it fills our hearts. Acting as though we love others and then sincerely opening ourselves to be filled with God’s pure love is different from just pretending we love everyone. Don’t fake it and tell yourself you’re done. That kind of so-called love is not what God requires of us, and He sees through it, even when we’re blind to it.

With tongue in cheek, Pastor Ray Ortlund wrote:

The beautiful “one another” commands of the New Testament are famous. But it is also striking to notice the “one anothers” that do not appear there.

For example, sanctify one another, humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, marginalize one another, exclude one another, judge one another, run one another’s lives, confess one another’s sins. . . .

Our relationships with one another reveal to us what we really believe as opposed to what we *think* we believe, our convictions as opposed to our opinions. It is possible for the gospel to remain at the shallow level of opinion, even sincere opinion, without penetrating to the deeper level of conviction. But when the gospel grips us down in our convictions, we embrace its implications wholeheartedly. Therefore, when we mistreat one another, our problem is not a lack of surface niceness but a lack of gospel depth. What we need is not only better manners but, far more, true faith.⁷

Obviously this was as much of a problem in the New Testament era as it is today. The writers of the epistles constantly drove home

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the importance of authenticity in the believer's relationships with others.

- “Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in *sincere love* of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart” (1 Peter 1:22).
- “But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, *let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth*” (1 John 3:17–18).
- “Now the purpose of the commandment is *love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith*” (1 Tim. 1:5).

REFLECT ON GOD'S LOVE FOR YOU

The apostle John wrote: “By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 3:16; 4:11).

On October 22, 2007, the first Medal of Honor awarded for combat in Afghanistan was presented to the family of Lt. Michael Murphy, a Navy SEAL who gave his life to make a radio call for help for his team. Murphy, who was not yet thirty, was only the fourth Navy SEAL to earn the Medal of Honor since the Vietnam War.

In June 2005, Murphy and three other SEALs were sent on a mission into the rugged Afghan mountains to search for a known terrorist. They encountered local tribesmen who reported them to the Taliban. Murphy's team was trapped by scores of enemy troops

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who surrounded them on three sides and forced them into a ravine. Soon all four men had sustained injuries. “We were hurtin’,” said the team’s sole survivor, Petty Officer 2nd Class Marcus Luttrell. “We were out of ammo, and . . . it was bad, it was real bad.”

Murphy moved from man to man to keep his team together, though he had to expose himself to enemy fire to do so. Then, because the mountainous terrain blocked communications, he made the decision to move into an open area to call for help. Already wounded, and despite incoming fire, he provided his unit’s location and information about the opposing force. While making the call, he took two more rounds and dropped the handset but managed to retrieve it and complete the call. He even said thank you at the end of the transmission.⁸

Petty Officer Luttrell survived the firestorm because he was blasted over the ridge by a rocket-propelled grenade and was knocked unconscious. When he came to, he hid in a rock crevice, staunching his bleeding wounds with mud. Almost a week later, after being taken in by local villagers who refused to turn him over to the Taliban, he was rescued.

Marcus Luttrell came home determined to tell the story of that day. His book, *Lone Survivor*, became a movie of the same name, ensuring that Lt. Michael Murphy and the rest of his team are never forgotten.

There’s only one symbol I know greater than the Medal of Honor, and that’s the Cross of Calvary. For a moment, use your imagination to consider how similar our plight was to that of Murphy’s team—trapped by the enemy, outnumbered, wounded, and facing overwhelming odds. Yet one man, Jesus, stood up and stretched out His arms and saved us.

Years ago, when my wife and I were in London, we visited some of

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the great churches in that city. As we were leaving St. Paul's Cathedral, I saw a statue in the annex that I've never forgotten. It was a huge portrayal of Jesus Christ twisting in anguish on the cross, intense pain on His face and blood dripping down His body. Underneath was a plaque reading: "This is how God loved the world."

Only when we understand how much God has loved us will we be able to love one another as we've been commanded. God calls us to be imitators of His love: "Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us" (Eph. 5:1-2).

PRAY FOR GREATER LOVE

One of the most productive things we can do to pursue a life beyond amazing is to read Paul's prayers for the churches he was involved with. He didn't pray for greater attendance, bigger offerings, or even more people becoming Christians. When we examine his prayers, we discover something far more challenging.

For instance, to the Christians in Philippi, he said this: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment" (Phil. 1:9).

And for the believers in Ephesus, this was his prayer: "That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:16-19).

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In 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul urges his readers to imitate him. We too should pray for greater love, whether we're praying that prayer for others or for ourselves. It is God's desire for all of us that we continue to grow in our ability to love one another. I promise you this is a prayer He will surely answer.

Having been a pastor for almost fifty years, I can also promise you there will always be people who test your ability to love. Some people are harder to love than others. Here's an important point to remember: You don't have to like them, but you do have to love them as Christ tells you to. Loving these people is a decision you make. Once you've made that decision, then you do good things for them because that's how you express your love.

One time I was in the drive-through line at the McDonald's near our church. I didn't realize that when I was pulling into the line, I'd cut a woman off. But when she rolled down her window and started swearing at me, I got the message loud and clear.

We all know what it's like to be yelled at furiously for something we did accidentally. So when I reached the window, I knew I had to do something to close this incident in a positive way. I told the cashier I wanted to pay for the meal of the woman in the car behind me. Sure enough, immediately I felt better. I don't know if she felt better, but I know I did.

Another time, the station manager of a radio station that aired our show called and said he was taking my show off to put someone else's show in our time slot. The details don't matter; but it was not a just or good decision, and it got into my spirit. I knew I needed to act to relieve myself of the burden this was putting on my heart. So I asked God for guidance, and He showed me what to do.

We'd paid for our airtime in advance, and some of that money was still in my account at that radio station. I called the station

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and told them not to send me that money, but to put it in the other man's account to pay for his time.

As soon as I did that, the whole incident was behind me. It was over. I put a period at the end of that sentence, turned the page, and left it behind.

The Bible says when others treat you badly, you're supposed to love them, pray for them, bless them, and do good things for them. If you can't do it because you want to, then you must do it because you're obedient.

Interestingly, the story doesn't end there. About six months later, the station manager called again. He was putting us back on the air in an even better time slot. And in that new time slot we did even better than before!

LOVE YOUR ENEMY

Difficult, unpleasant people are one thing. An enemy is something very different.

It may be one of the most difficult things we are called to do in this life, but Jesus very clearly commands us to love our enemies. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:43–45).

If you are still in doubt about the fact that love is an action, take note of this verse. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and then He tells us how: bless them, do good to them, and pray for them. That's how you love your enemy.

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To the natural mind, this seems to be taking love a step too far. How can you love people who are undermining values you hold dear? How can you love the person who lied about you to make herself look good? Or the person who claimed your idea as his own and got a promotion for it? Or the person who stole your identity, molested your daughter, or murdered your son?

This is truly where we must be kind to ourselves and very clear about what God is asking us to do. We are not asked to abandon our feelings; we are asked to bless and pray that God will do His work in the lives of our enemies. We are not asked to expose ourselves or others to these people, but only to pray, bless, and do good for them. After all, many of those who harm us are not repentant, and they may even still be a danger or threat to us or others in some way.

This is an enormous task, and it may seem impossible. And that is why we have examples in the Bible of people who obeyed this command.

Jesus gave us the ultimate example by giving up His life on the cross for the very people who were demanding and performing His execution, and then saying from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). And His followers took that example to heart.

When Stephen was being stoned to death for preaching the gospel, he also asked God to forgive his executioners: “Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin’” (Acts 7:60).

The apostle Paul spent his adult life as a servant of the gospel and was beaten, whipped, rebuked, and despised for it: “Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat” (1 Cor. 4:12–13). In his letter to the Romans, Paul said, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink;

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for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:20–21).

During the American Revolution, a pastor named Peter Miller was opposed and humiliated by Michael Whitman, an evil-minded man who did all he could to suppress the gospel. One day, Mr. Whitman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Rather than breathe a sigh of relief at the news, Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to plead for his enemy’s life. When General George Washington first listened to the plea, he told Miller that he would not grant the life of his friend. At that the pastor leaped to his feet. “My friend!” he exclaimed. “Michael Whitman is not my friend, but my bitterest enemy!” Washington changed his mind and granted a pardon. Peter Miller was doing exactly what Jesus called us to do. He was loving his enemy, not in how he felt toward the man, but in what he did for the man.⁹

DON’T BE AFRAID TO RISK

One reason people give for withholding love from others is that they don’t want to get hurt. They talk about the times when they loved and were wounded in return. “I’ll never trust anyone again,” they say. “I’ll never let anyone hurt me like that again.”

If you’ve experienced rejection or have walked through it with others, I understand your determination never to risk that happening again. But read this before you make that decision.

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no

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one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. . . . The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers . . . of love is Hell.¹⁰

In 2009, Lisa Fenn was an ESPN features television producer looking for a good story. She found it when she met and filmed two young wrestlers at Cleveland's Lincoln-West High School. Seven years later, she wrote about what became a life-changing experience.

Dartanyon Crockett was the high school's top wrestling talent. A winner in multiple weight classes, Dartanyon was also homeless and legally blind. When Lisa met him, he subsisted on the soggy mozzarella sticks and bruised apples served in cafeteria lunches.

Perched atop Dartanyon's back—yes, riding on his back—was wrestling teammate Leroy Sutton. Leroy traveled around up there because he had no legs, and the school had no elevator. When he was eleven, he was hit by a freight train. Paramedics saved his life, but his left leg was amputated below the knee, his right leg below the hip.

Lisa filmed the two boys and their world for five months. Later, editing their story, "Carry On," she "prayed that just one viewer would be moved to help the boys in a meaningful way."

Her prayer was answered. Viewers around the world took the boys into their hearts, and e-mails filled her in-box, offering help.

And that's when love took over. Lisa personally responded to nearly one thousand e-mails. She managed donations, speaking invitations, financial aid forms, and college visits, all while

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ensuring that Dartanyon and Leroy were finally fed on a daily basis. The generosity of ESPN viewers made it possible for Leroy to move to Arizona to study video game design at Collins College. He became not only the first in his family to graduate from high school, but also the first to receive a college diploma.

The attention brought Dartanyon a different kind of training: In March 2010, coaches invited him to live at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs to learn the Paralympic sport of judo. There he would have shelter, sport, mentors, school, medical care, and, as he proudly showed Lisa on a visit to Colorado, his first bed.

Against the odds, Dartanyon earned a spot on the 2012 Paralympic team going to the London Olympics. And there, he won the bronze. When the medal was draped around Dartanyon's neck, Leroy and Lisa were there to see it.

"Things like this don't happen to kids like us," he cried on that unimaginable night, his face beaming bronze, his tears soaking Lisa's shoulder.

"And he is right," Lisa wrote. "Blind and legless kids from the ghettos don't get college educations and shiny accolades, but they should. And that is why I stayed. Because hope and love and rejoicing and redemption can happen to kids like them."

During a visit to the eye doctor in 2009, Dartanyon included Lisa on the consent form so she could access his records if need be. Later that day, she got a call from the office administrator. "I just thought you should know what Dartanyon wrote on his consent form today," she said. "Next to your name, on the release, is a space that says 'Relationship to Patient.' Dartanyon wrote 'Guardian Angel.'"¹¹

Why did Lisa Fenn stay in these boys' lives when she could easily have moved on? She stayed because she loved them.

PRACTICE LOVE EVERY DAY

Just as we learn to walk one step at a time, we learn to love one loving act at a time. We cannot become loving people by doing one gigantic act of love. We learn to love by incorporating love into all of the little things we do. “Let all that you do be done with love” (1 Cor. 16:14).

We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a 1,000 dollar bill and laying it on the table—“Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all.”

But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here, 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid’s troubles instead of saying, “Get lost.” Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.

Usually giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious. It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time.¹²

We’d rather just do one big thing and get it over with—and maybe get a pat on the back in return (more about that in chapter 8 when we discover the life of humility). But as we will see, the life beyond amazing is not flashy. It’s lived out in small, everyday ways over the course of a lifetime.

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

—1 JOHN 4:7