

FOREWORD BY  
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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *NOT A FAN*

# GOD

# FOR THE REST OF US

**EXPERIENCE UNBELIEVABLE LOVE,  
UNLIMITED HOPE, AND UNCOMMON GRACE**



**VINCE ANTONUCCI**

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## FOREWORD

ONE OF MY NEPHEWS was telling me about his recent experience at a car dealership. He was planning on taking advantage of a year-end special. He had a buddy drop him off at the dealership, confident he would be driving home in his new truck. He took a test drive and worked with a salesperson to find the right color with the right options. He was then asked to fill out a loan application. As he began answering the different questions, he started to get a little nervous. The dealership checked his credit, and since he didn't have any, he didn't qualify for the loan. He called his mom and asked her to come pick him up.

As my nephew gets older he'll learn to be skeptical of such offers. The year-end special was a great deal, but only for certain people. You have to meet the right criteria. You have to have a certain amount of resources. It was a great deal for *some* people, but not for *all* people.

A few years ago I went to the home of an older couple who were interested in becoming a part of the church where I pastor. Neither of them had grown up in church, and they had only attended services where I preach a few times. They had

a few questions about the church, and then with complete sincerity and spirit of humility, the wife asked, “Is there an application I need to fill out to be a member of your church?” Before I had a chance to respond, her husband jumped in and asked a question with a little more cynicism: “What I want to know is, how much does it cost?” They assumed there was an application process and a price tag for being a part of the church.

I quickly explained to them that they didn’t have to pass a test, and that being a Christian and a part of the church was free. I talked to them about the love of God and his gift of grace through Jesus Christ. But they were both skeptical. It seemed too good to be true, and they were convinced that there was some fine print they weren’t being told about.

As a pastor, I regularly talk to people who don’t think their application for God’s love and grace will be approved. It may be a great deal for some people, but not for them. They know their own histories. They have ideas about their value and worth, and they feel certain that they won’t qualify. I suppose, if I’m being honest, these aren’t just stories that people share with me; there have been times when that’s been my story as well. I know my own sins and failures. I know the debt I have accumulated, and there are some days when I have a hard time believing God loves me.

I love this book because it convinces me that God’s love is greater and deeper than I dared imagine. It challenges me to share that extravagant love with others. There is no shortage of books out there that share ideas and commentary about

## FOREWORD

God's love. This book doesn't just tell me about God's love; it shows me what God's love looks like when it's lived out in real life.

I have known Vince Antonucci for well over a decade, and I love getting to spend time with him, because he always has the most incredible stories of how God's love is impacting the people he pastors in Las Vegas. In these pages, you will read real-life stories from the people Vince and his church minister to—stories that will have you laughing and crying, that will lead you to realize no one is beyond God's grace, that will make you fall in love with God for the first time, or all over again.

*Kyle Idleman*

author of *Not a Fan* and *The End of Me*



# 1

## GOD FOR THE REST OF US

PUTTING DUCT TAPE over our mouths was a nice touch. But it did get us accused of child abuse. Ah, the perils of shock art for Jesus.

We were on Fremont Street. Fremont is the “old Strip” in Las Vegas and still the most visited attraction in Sin City. It’s where the bullhorn Christians hang out and yell. They stand on soapboxes, informing people that their final destination will be hotter than a 115-degree August day in the desert outside Vegas.

One full-time hatermonger on Fremont is a guy who stands proudly holding up a huge sign with the title “WWJD?” Just below the letters it says, “Who Will Jesus Destroy?”

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Underneath is a list of all kinds of sinners. Some are a bit more scandalous—abortionists, murderers, oppressive communist despots. But take heart, you're on the list too. It includes liars, gossips, cheats, the lust filled. The man yells and angles his sign at everyone who passes—drunk guys from Wisconsin, the handicapped homeless lady shuffling by, businessmen from Poughkeepsie, the elderly ladies from the church in Iowa who are in town for the knitting convention.

At some point it's not enough just to shake your head in sadness at the guy holding the sign. At some point you have to make a sign of your own, and we decided to do it. That's not entirely true. We actually decided to go with flyers because it seemed like a more personal touch—and we could also be sure to avoid splinters.

Our flyer's title? "WDJL?" Just below the letters it says, "Who Does Jesus Love?" Underneath is a list of, well . . . it's the exact same list as on the "Who Will Jesus Destroy?" sign. We realized that copying the list would lose us creativity points, but we wanted to make sure everyone made the connection to the bullhorn, hatemonger guy.

To add creativity, we put duct tape over our mouths as we handed out the flyers right in front of the bullhorn, hatemonger guy. Under the list of people Jesus loves, our flyers proclaimed:

It's very common to find "street preachers" here on Fremont Street, loudly declaring who *God hates*. There's a problem with that, and it's that **GOD**

LOVES. The Bible says that “God IS love” and that he sent Jesus not to condemn, but because of and in love.

The truth is that *God loves* . . . homosexuals, gamblers, strippers, abortionists, prostitutes, addicts, and you.

And so we apologize for anything you’ve ever heard that would lead you to believe otherwise. The reason they spread a message of hate is because there is power in hate. But we have chosen the way of Jesus, the way of love, and find it far more powerful.

We have taped our mouths shut as a symbolic way of offsetting the verbal abuse you may have heard in the past and may hear tonight.

So, in this battle of the signs (okay, it was a battle of a sign versus flyers, but at least we didn’t get splinters—but don’t ask me about all the paper cuts), who was right? Was God smiling down on bullhorn, hatemonger guy or on the duct-taped crusaders of love? For the answer, we need to go to Jesus.

## Stories

Jesus loved to tell stories.

His stories made people angry. People hated him for his stories.

You could argue that it was his stories that got him killed. One time Jesus was surrounded by two very different

groups of people. One group was made up of “tax collectors and sinners.”

The tax collectors were Jews who had betrayed God and his people by siding with the Romans. The Romans were trying to take over the world, and their strategy was violence. They would come into a Jewish town and demand that everyone worship Caesar. Those who refused because they were faithful to God would be executed. The invaders would then tax those left alive and use the money to fund their massive army, invade more towns, and kill more innocent Jewish people. The Romans hired Jews to collect the taxes from their own people—Jewish money funding the murder of more Jews.

The sinners were, well, sinners. We know that we’re all sinners, but you’ve got to be on the other side of awful for it to be written on your name tag at social functions. These weren’t garden-variety sinners. These were “notoriously evil people as well as those who refused to follow the Mosaic Law as interpreted by the teachers of the law. The term was commonly used of tax collectors, adulterers, robbers and the like.”<sup>1</sup>

Why were the tax collectors and sinners gathered around Jesus? We’re told, “to hear [him].”<sup>2</sup> They loved Jesus and his stories.

Think about that for a minute. When God came to earth, the people who wanted to be around him were tax collectors, adulterers, and robbers. It was the sinners who loved to be around Jesus.

A second group was stalking the periphery of this notorious band of sinners—the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.”<sup>3</sup> They weren’t gathered around Jesus because they loved to be around him. They were gathered around Jesus because they hated it that the *sinners* loved to be around him. They were the ones who hated Jesus’ stories, who thought murder was the best way to stop him from telling his scandalous little parables. We’re told that they were muttering to one another. Personally, I don’t think I’ve ever been around a group of mutterers, but it doesn’t sound like a fun time. What they were muttering was, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”<sup>4</sup> They found Jesus’ actions offensive.

In response, Jesus told a story. Actually, he told three stories.

## The First Two Stories

The first two stories are about people who lose things—a shepherd who loses a sheep and a woman who loses a coin. Both have plenty more. In fact, it’s a bit of a surprise that they even notice that one is missing.

My parents had two kids. Once when I was about six years old and my sister, Lisa, was four, our parents took us out for dinner.\* Afterward they put us in the backseat of the car. They did not buckle us in. This was the mid-seventies, and my parents now tell me that no one put seat belts on

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\*I believe it was Arthur Treacher’s Fish & Chips. (Have you ever heard of Arthur Treacher’s? Have you ever been to Arthur Treacher’s? If so, let me know. There’s a support group I can tell you about.)

their kids back then. I believe they just didn't care about us. My parents got in the front, started the car, and popped in the 8-track tape.\* Knowing my parents, it was probably *Neil Diamond's Greatest Hits*.\*\* So the music filled the car ("Hands, touching hands, reachin' out, touchin' me, touchin' you. Sweet Caroline . . ."\*\*\*). My father shifted into drive and pulled out of the parking spot. It turned out they hadn't shut my sister's door very well, so it swung open. My sister was leaning against it and fell out of the car. The door quietly swung shut. My parents didn't notice. And I didn't say a word! I just waved good-bye out the back window. "Good times never seemed so good. I've been inclined to believe they never would." We turned out of the parking lot and started driving down the road. Finally, my father looked back, did a double take, frantically surveyed the backseat of the car, and then yelled, "Where's Lisa?" I pointed back at the parking lot. "But . . . now . . . I . . ." My father slammed on the brakes, whipped the car around, went back, and found my sister sobbing in the parking lot.\*\*\*\*

My parents had only two kids, but it took them a while to realize that one of us was missing . . . from the car! But the shepherd and the woman in Jesus' stories immediately recognize that something is missing.

And they not only realize it; they care. In fact, each goes on an all-out search-and-rescue mission. And when they find

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\*If you're younger than 40, call your parents and ask them what an 8-track is.

\*\*If you're younger than 40, call your parents and ask them who Neil Diamond is.

\*\*\*You just sang, "Bum, bum, bum"! Admit it!

\*\*\*\*She always was a crybaby.

what's lost, they party like it's 1999. They're on their cell phones, calling their neighbors, and inviting them into the celebration.

It all seems over the top. Borderline absurd. But then Jesus inserts the knife. "In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."<sup>5</sup> These aren't just cute stories. They are more of Jesus' parabolic grenades, and it's obvious that Jesus was responding to the mutterers. The stories aren't really about a lost sheep and a lost coin. These stories show that the reason Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them was because those sinners were actually God's lost children.

When our kids were younger, my wife and I took them to a big water park. Our son was five and our daughter was about to turn three, so we spent the day in the kiddie pools. Each pool had slides and all kinds of fun stuff. We played in one pool for a while and then walked about a hundred yards to a second kiddie pool, where we let the kids splash around. We then walked another hundred yards to the next one. My kids were repeatedly going down one big slide. My wife walked over to the other side of the pool where they had a big, mushroom-shaped umbrella shower. My son, Dawson, came down the slide and asked, "Where's Mom?"

"She's over by the mushroom-water-shower-umbrella thingy," I answered.

"Can I go get her?" he asked.

"Sure," I told him, "Go ahead."

About five minutes later I grabbed my daughter and said, "Let's go get Mommy and Dawson."

So we went over to the shower. My wife was still under it, but all by herself.

I asked, "Where's Dawson?"

She was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"I sent him over about five minutes ago."

"I haven't seen him."

I started looking all over the kiddie pool. I didn't see him. I thought, *Don't freak out, Vince, he's here. Um, he's wearing a blue bathing suit.* I looked for a blue bathing suit. No. *Okay. It's okay. Look for light brown hair.* No. *Maybe he's in one of the slides.* No. I finally yelled, "Dawson!"

It had now been about ten minutes since we had seen our son. I continued to look. Soon it was fifteen minutes. I thought, *I am never going to see my son again. I'm never going to hold my son again.* I started totally freaking out.

The kiddie pool was in a sort of valley. I ran up the stairs to the sidewalk so I could have a better view of the whole pool. I looked down. Dawson was not there. My heart started racing. My throat was closing up. My head was pounding. I looked again. He was not there. Blue bathing suit? No. Light brown hair? No. In one of the slides? No. I wanted to *die*.

I looked up the sidewalk to my left. No. I looked down the sidewalk to my right. No. I looked in the pool again. No. It had now been close to twenty minutes. I again looked up the sidewalk to my left. Far down the path I saw what seemed to be a light-brown-haired kid weaving between

people. I couldn't see the color of the bathing suit. I called out, "Dawson? Dawson!"

Then I yelled again, "Dawson!"

Finally the light-brown-haired boy looked up, and it was my son. "Dawson!"

He saw me, and his face went white. I ran toward him. He ran toward me. We met. He dove into my arms, crying. I asked, "Where were you?"

"I went to find Mommy," he said. "I thought she was at the pool we were at before."

I said, "You went all the way to the other pool by yourself?" And I held him. And I held him. And I held him. And I realized in that moment that I understood, just a little, what it's like to be God. The way I felt about my son, wondering if I'd ever see or hold him again, is the way God feels about all of his children who have wandered away from him.<sup>7</sup> I think of Jeremiah 4, where God says, "Oh, my anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain. Oh, the agony of my heart! My heart pounds within me, I cannot keep silent."<sup>6</sup> Pretty intense talk coming from God, and it makes you wonder: What is God so tormented about? He tells us: "My people are fools; they do not know me. They are senseless children; they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil; they know not how to do good."<sup>8</sup>

But God doesn't reject his senseless children. His heart is broken, and he offers an invitation: "If you, Israel, will return, then return to me."<sup>9</sup>

That's why Jesus came. It was an all-out search-and-rescue mission. It was to get God's lost children home.

## Prodigal: The Trilogy Complete

For the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, the first two stories were bad enough. But Jesus proceeds to tell a third story, and it's worse.

We call this story the parable of the Prodigal Son, but as one of my favorite Bible teachers, Timothy Keller, points out, there are some problems with that.

First, the story features *three* characters, not just a son.

And second, most people don't know what the word *prodigal* means, even if they think they do.

In the movie *The Princess Bride*, Inigo Montoya says to a character named Vizzini about his incessant use of the word *inconceivable*, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Sometimes words don't mean what we think they mean.

A lot of people use the word *nauseous*. As in, "I'm feeling nauseous." And they think it means "to feel sick," but it doesn't. Nauseous actually means to *cause* nausea. So if you eat a whole chocolate cake and say, "I feel nauseous," what you're actually saying is that you're causing the people around you to feel sick.\*

Or the word *literally*. People misuse it all the time. It means "truly or actually." Sports announcers will say, "In the fourth quarter, LeBron James literally put the team on his back and carried them to victory!" Really? 'Cause that's a basketball game I want to see! Or people say, "I'm literally

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\*Which, I guess, you might be.

starving to death.” You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.\*

Sometimes words lose their meanings when they’re translated into another language. At one point Pepsi had a slogan, “Come alive! You’re in the Pepsi generation,” which they learned, too late, was translated into Chinese as “Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave.” When KFC opened its first franchise in Beijing, the restaurant’s famous slogan was translated from “Finger-lickin’ good,” to “Eat your fingers off.” (Yum!) Coors Brewing Company also ran into problems when trying to translate a slogan. After launching their “Turn it loose” campaign in Spain, they discovered that this translates to “Suffer from diarrhea”! (Yum?)

So we say this story is about a *prodigal* son. We call the son in this story a prodigal. You may have used the word. But I do not think it means what you think it means. Somewhere along the way, something was lost in translation.

The word *prodigal* means “wastefully extravagant.” That’s what the word *literally* means. Wastefully extravagant.

Jesus’ third story in this trilogy is one we call the parable of the Prodigal Son. And it seems appropriate for me to write about the idea of a prodigal because in 2009 I moved to become sort of a missionary to Las Vegas. A year later we started a church right in the heart of Sin City. And Las Vegas is the land of prodigals.

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\* Although one of the amazing things about the English language is that if enough people misuse a word, eventually the “wrong” meaning makes it into the dictionary along with the original meaning.

## GOD FOR THE REST OF US

Look around Las Vegas, especially the Strip, and you'll see that the city has been extravagantly wasteful. Why? Because they hope tourists who come will return the favor. Vegas's thinking is: We will be extravagantly wasteful in spending money in order to lure you to Sin City so you will be extravagantly wasteful in *losing* money.

And everywhere you look around the city, you see prodigals. Let me introduce you to some of the prodigals I've met in Las Vegas:

Peter was in his fifties and going nowhere fast. Seeking meaning, he explored Eastern religions. He was still confused spiritually, but the one conclusion he had come to was that reincarnation is real.

Hector grew up in a Las Vegas gang. It was basically all he ever knew.

Dharma was a dancer in several Las Vegas shows, including at least one where she danced topless. Her husband worked in IT for a pornography company.

Randy was an addict who called our church to find out if we had a 12-step program.

David seemed to be a young entrepreneurial businessman who was doing well for himself. The truth is that he was wanted by the police in another state where he had been a drug dealer.

Julie was a pole-dancing instructor.

Scott and Cooper were atheists.

Frank was a strip-club bouncer and leg breaker raising two teenage sons on his own.

Sal was a casino pitboss.

Jack was an alcoholic taxi driver who was considering suicide because his life had bottomed out.

Cici was a crystal meth addict who for years had been a member of the Order, a white supremacist neo-Nazi hate group. She had been married nine times and shot fourteen times.

Sandy was a Britney Spears impersonator determined to never go back to church because she believed it was a negative place filled with judgmental people.

I've become convinced that all these people are looking for love. You might think of being in a gang, dancing topless, or doing (or selling) drugs as a rejection of God's love, but I believe the people who do those things are searching for it. I think you are too. And so am I. That's why I wrote this book. Because we underestimate the scope and the power of God's love. We think there are people's lives to whom it doesn't apply. We might even include ourselves in that list. And we don't grasp how powerful God's love can be when it's applied to a person's life, so some of us may never let it take hold of us. That brings us back to Jesus' third story. To the inner circle of tax collectors and sinners and to the muttering periphery of Pharisees and teachers of the law, Jesus tells the story of the Prodigal Son.

It starts out with a father of two sons. The younger son comes to his father and demands his inheritance. Basically he tells his father that he wishes the father were dead, but lacking that good fortune, he'd at least like to spend the rest of his life pretending it was the case. The father gives him what he asks

for, and his younger son goes off and wastes it all. He lives out his every sinful fantasy until he finds himself out of money and physically in the same squalor his soul has been residing in. Staring up from rock bottom, he has a change of heart. He decides to return home. He doesn't imagine his father will take him back as a son, but he hopes his father will give him a job working on the farm. As he makes the journey home, he practices a speech: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."<sup>10</sup>

What he doesn't know is that since he left, his father has been sitting on the front porch, staring down the road, hoping this day would come. So "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."<sup>11</sup> The father welcomes his son back into the family and throws a party to celebrate his return.

Consider this for a moment. Think about the absolute worst thing you did growing up. How did your parents respond? I'm guessing they didn't throw you a celebratory party. "Our son got his girlfriend pregnant. Come to a party in his honor!" "Our daughter wrapped our car around a telephone pole on the way home from a party she wasn't allowed to be at. Come celebrate with us!" "We found drugs and pornography in our son's room. We're renting a ballroom and hiring the best band in town. You won't believe the amazing cake we got him!"

Nope.

That's not what they did.

No matter how loving your parents may have been, it doesn't even begin to compare to the astonishing grace of God.

And that's what Jesus is trying to communicate in this story. The father represents God. The son takes half his father's money, leaves home, and spends it all on prostitutes and partying. The son comes home in reproachable dishonor. And the father throws him a party.

It seems like that should be the absurd but happy ending of the story, but Jesus continues, and this is where he really twists the knife.

Suddenly the older brother appears. He's indignant that his father has accepted his wayward brother back into the family. And he cannot believe the audacity of his father actually throwing a party for him. He says, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"<sup>12</sup>

Then Jesus ends the story—looking, I imagine, with sadness at the Pharisees and teachers of the law glaring at him from a distance—by sharing the response of the father to his indignant son. "My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"<sup>13</sup>

So people call this the parable of the Prodigal Son. And originally the idea was probably that the younger son was “extravagantly wasteful” with his father’s money.

But since nowadays we don’t attach the original, actual definition to *prodigal*, when we call the younger son the prodigal, what we’re probably thinking is that he was the son who rejected his father’s love.

And he *did*. When he asked for his father’s inheritance, he wasn’t just requesting an advance on his money. He was telling his father that he wished his father were dead. He was saying, “Father, I don’t want *you*. I just want your stuff.”

But let’s be clear: the older son *also* rejected his father and his father’s love. The younger son rejected his father through a journey of self-discovery. He thought there was pleasure to be found out in the world and that finding it would mean he wouldn’t need his father. The older rejected his father through morality. He thought he was so good that he really didn’t need his father.<sup>14</sup> And like his brother, the older son didn’t really want his father either; he just wanted his father’s stuff. When he learned of the party, the older son angrily complained that his father had never given him a young goat so he could have a party with his friends.\*

And actually, the older brother and his rejection of the father is more the point of Jesus’ story. We feel like the story is more about the younger son. But the reason Jesus told this story was to address the objections of the religious legalists.

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\*Cause there ain’t no party like a young goat party, ‘cause a young goat party don’t stop.

They couldn't understand why Jesus was teaching that God was for these rebellious sinners. With the character of the older son, Jesus was trying to show them that they also had rejected God. Rather than rejecting him through bad behavior like the "sinners," these legalists had rejected God through good behavior that led them to believe they were beyond the need of God's grace.

But the star prodigal of this story is . . . the *father*. *Prodigal* means extravagantly wasteful, and the father in the story is the most extravagantly wasteful character of all. The younger son wished him dead, but the father gave the money to him anyway. The older son completely disrespected him, but the father told him, "Everything I have is yours." The father in this story is the prodigal father. He is extravagantly wasteful with his love.

The point of Jesus' story is that God is for everyone. Some won't receive his love, so you could argue it's wasted on them. But God offers it nonetheless.

The stories of the prodigals I meet in Las Vegas could be viewed as a testament of God's wasteful love. Honestly, *I* serve as a living illustration. I think of all the love God has squandered on me because I stubbornly refused it and also of how radically his love has transformed my life when I willingly received it. And I wonder about you. Can you look back on years of love God has wasted on you because you were unaware or unwilling to accept it? Maybe you're ready to have your life revolutionized by the most powerful force in the universe—the limitless love of God.

## Pouring Love

Literally (as in actually, truly) as I was writing that last paragraph, there was a knock on our front door. Our neighbor was standing there, and he said, “This is not a complaint, just an observation. But there is water from your yard pouring under the wall between us and into my yard. I’m afraid if it continues, the wall is going to come down. Just thought you might want to know.”

Um, yeah, I want to know!

Jesus left heaven and came to earth to pour God’s love from his place into ours, from his heart into ours, from his life into ours. His goal, in a sense, was for the dividing wall to come down so heaven would fill up the earth.

Jesus came to pour God’s love all over the place.

Philip Yancey, in his book *What’s So Amazing about Grace?*, tells the unfortunately true story about a time a woman went to see a counselor in Chicago and confessed that she was a drug addict who prostituted herself to get money to support her drug habit. Then the whole truth came out. Through sobs, she told the counselor that she had been renting out her two-year-old daughter to men who wanted her for kinky sex. She made more money renting her child out for an hour than she could make on her own in an entire night. The counselor had never heard anything like that. He didn’t know what to say. Finally, he asked her, “Have you thought of going to a church for help?” He later said, “I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. ‘Church!’ she cried. ‘Why

would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."<sup>15</sup>

The sucker punch of that story is that if you study Jesus' life, perhaps the most remarkable thing about him is that he was the only sinless person to ever walk the face of the planet, and yet everywhere he went, the most sinful people were drawn to him like a magnet.

Why?

Because Jesus didn't make people feel worse.

He made them feel loved.

Jesus knew a secret that many Christians today seem to have forgotten: *it's love that turns a life around*. The way to change a life is not by judging people but by embracing them. Not by pointing out their sins but by pointing the way to hope.

What's so disturbing is that what Jesus was known for—amazing grace—is the exact opposite of what Christians are known for today. We're known for judgment and condemnation. We're known not for what we're for—loving God and loving people—but for what we're against.

Jesus spoke truth to people, but he always led with love. That's why sinful people wanted to be around Jesus, and why Jesus was called a "friend of . . . sinners."<sup>16</sup>

One of those sinners was Zacchaeus. Like many of the people gathered around Jesus when he told the three search-and-rescue stories, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Worse, he was the city of Jericho's *chief* tax collector. More than anyone else in his town, Zacchaeus was responsible for making sure

the Roman army—whose soldiers were impaling Jewish men, women, and children on poles—was well funded. Zacchaeus, a Jew, was collecting exorbitant taxes from the other Jews to pay for the Roman army so they could annihilate more Jewish people.

If anyone deserved condemnation from God, it was Zacchaeus. So when Jesus comes to Jericho, does he condemn Zacchaeus? Does Jesus make him feel worse? No, Jesus asks if he can have lunch at Zacchaeus's house.<sup>17</sup>

Jesus loved not only to tell stories but also to *write* stories. We have no evidence that Jesus ever put pen to paper,\* but he wrote stories in human lives. He would meet a person, and the interaction would leave the person changed. It was like that person's story was rewritten. And the agent that Jesus used to produce this change in people was love.

That's exactly what happens with Zacchaeus. Jesus poured God's love on him, and it turned his life upside down. Heaven spilled into Zacchaeus that day.

Jesus continues to rewrite people's lives today. My life is one of his many incredible second drafts. My father was a con artist who was in and out of prison. My mother was Jewish by birth, an atheist by choice. I never went to church and had no exposure to Jesus. I grew up sad and tried to bury my feelings in alcohol and drugs, then in success. That's when Jesus entered my life. I know it sounds like I'm telling you some kind of fairy tale, but this one's true. Jesus flipped my

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\*Ink to papyrus?

script. I'll tell you more about that later. But for now, I'll tell you that despite the inauspicious beginning of my story, God has given me the honor of being part of starting two churches trying to follow in the way of Jesus by pouring God's love on all kinds of people. I started a church in Virginia Beach in 1997, where I pastored for twelve years. Then I moved to Las Vegas to start Verve. And Las Vegas is where I met all the prodigals I mentioned earlier. All those prodigals are people who have had their stories rewritten by Jesus.

Peter, the believer in reincarnation, gave his life to Jesus.

Hector, who grew up in a Las Vegas gang, told everyone just before we baptized him, "I spent my entire life in gangs. Walking into this church was the first time I've ever felt accepted for who I am."

Dharma, the topless dancer, came to Verve, discovered that God loves her for what's on the inside, and decided to quit dancing topless.

Randy, the addict who called our church to find out if we had a 12-step program, started coming to our church and found a higher power named Jesus, and Jesus has set him free.

David, who was wanted as a drug dealer in Ohio, gave his life to Christ, and he has totally changed.

The same happened to Julie, the pole-dancing instructor. And Scott and Cooper, the atheists. And the two teenage sons of Frank, the strip-club bouncer. And Sal, the casino pitboss.

After many long conversations at Starbucks, Jack, the alcoholic taxi driver, was baptized in my pool.

## GOD FOR THE REST OF US

Cici, the crystal meth addict who was part of the neo-Nazi, white-supremacist, skinhead hate group, called our church because she had heard about us on a sex website.\* She called because she was about to commit suicide. She was persuaded not to, and that Sunday she showed up at our church. Soon, her life inverted. She gave her life to Jesus and then to feeding homeless people. In fact, she got other people from Verve involved, and each Thanksgiving they would feed hundreds of homeless people. I asked Cici what led her to do that, assuming she had probably experienced homelessness at some point in her troubled journey. She told me she had briefly been homeless once, but that wasn't her reason for wanting to help the homeless. What has driven her is that the homeless are the skinheads' biggest targets. They practice killing homeless people because no one misses them when they're gone; the police rarely investigate when one is found beaten to death. And Cici said that now nothing gets to her like seeing homeless people smile when she serves them.

Sandy, the Britney Spears impersonator, showed up at Verve after seeing a card for our church that said, "God for the Rest of Us." And Sandy, who had gone to church a variety of times throughout her life, was shocked to learn that God loved her. That Jesus came to save her, not to condemn her. And Sandy said yes. She dove into God's Kingdom, and everything about her life has changed.\*\*

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\*Apparently we're all the rage on Vegas's sex websites. I think that's as weird as you do. Please don't write me letters.

\*\*If you're wondering, yes, her job has changed too. She's no longer a Britney Spears impersonator.

In fact, what has changed *all those people* is learning that God is for the rest of us. He's not just for the missionary doctors and the Baptists and the preachers. No, he's also for the abortion doctors and the bisexuals and the pornographers.

This is why Jesus came. Not to condemn us for our sins but to save us from them. And to let us know that no matter what we've done, God still loves us.

He is wastefully extravagant with his love. He is for every person who has rejected him in Las Vegas. He was for the tax collectors and sinners who had rejected him by seeking pleasure. He was for the Pharisees and teachers of the law who rejected him through their prideful moralism. And he's for you.

Personally, I've gone from not knowing God at all, to struggling to believe that he could love someone like me, to starting two churches for people who have no interest in a God whom they think has no interest in them. Each step of the way I've been learning more about who God is for. And I'm going to share my story—and what I've learned—with you, because I think it can change your life. And it could change the lives of the people God puts in your path.

## Your Story

My guess is your story is kind of similar to the story of either the sinners or the Pharisees who surrounded Jesus that day.

If you're like the "sinners and tax collectors," you have trouble believing God's love is for you, because you think you're too bad. You feel like your immoral life has lowered you to a place beyond the reach of God's grace.

If you're in this group, you're still stuck on the sentence where I said that God is for abortion doctors, bisexuals, and pornographers. And you have a thousand questions you want to ask:

"If God really is for them, maybe God could also be for me?"

"Is it more accurate to say that God would be for me if I stopped doing the things I'm doing?"

"But what about my sin?"

"What if I say yes to God but keep on sinning? The one thing I don't want to be is a hypocrite."

"Don't I have to obey Jesus for him to love me? Are you just nice and trying to make me feel good?"

"Is this the book I've been waiting for, the one that could change my life?"

"Are you ever going to answer these questions or not?"

Yes, I'll answer them. In fact, I think the answers will come out in just about every chapter in this book.

If you're like the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you have trouble believing God's love is for "them" because you think you're so good. You feel like your moral life has raised you to a place where you deserve God's favor.

If you're in this group, you're still stuck on the sentence where I said that God is for abortion doctors, bisexuals, and pornographers. And you have a thousand questions you want to ask:

"Isn't it too strong to say God is *for* them?"

"Maybe it'd be more accurate to say that God *would be*

for them *if* they stopped being abortion doctors, bisexuals, and pornographers?”

“But what about sin? Is this author soft on sin?”

“If we tell those kinds of people God is for them, will they take that as permission to keep on sinning?”

“All those ‘prodigals’ in Las Vegas, were they told the hard truth about sin and obedience to Jesus as Lord, or did you just give them a cotton-candy version of Christianity that made them feel good?”

“Should I even continue reading this book?”

“Are you ever going to answer these questions or not?”

Yes, I’ll answer them, but not yet. I think it may be healthy for you to live in that tension for a while. I might even make you wait till the last chapter.

So my guess is that your story is kind of similar to the story of either the sinners or the Pharisees who surrounded Jesus that day. And if that’s true, Jesus wants to change your story. He loves telling stories, and he would love to tell a new story with your life. He loves writing stories, and perhaps there’s some rewriting that needs to happen with your personal script.

My hope is that as you read the stories of God’s audacious and life-shaping grace in this book, it will start to remold your story.

And the agent of change that Jesus will use in your life is love, the love of a wastefully extravagant God who *is* for the rest of us—and is for *you* as well.