



THE
bad habits
OF JESUS

SHOWING US THE WAY TO LIVE RIGHT
IN A WORLD GONE WRONG

LEONARD SWEET

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The Bad Habits of Jesus: Showing Us the Way to Live Right in a World Gone Wrong

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WE LIVE IN A WORLD where *cool* has nothing to do with climate, *hip* is not a part of the body, and to say someone *killed it* doesn't mean they hurt anybody but brought something to life.

It has not been easy learning to speak and think in this new vernacular, where *bad* is good and where *cougar*, *trout*, and *salmon* have nothing to do with nature. I could not have made these transitions and translations without the help of my three youngest kids, Egil, Soren, and Thane. For their willingness to let their father sit on his kids' knees and learn from them, I am grateful. Even though this book was written in six weeks, when I didn't have time to have time, thanks to Elizabeth I always knew I needed to make time and learn how to take time to have time.

For the last two years I have served as Distinguished Visiting Professor at Tabor College. The Tabor master's students I taught in the spring of 2016 were some of the brightest and most

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innovative students with whom I have ever had the privilege of studying. I am jealous of Rick Bartlett and David Swisher for spending their full time with such stellar graduate students. For their insights on these “bad habits” during the course of this semester, I am grateful to Edith Buller-Breer, Greg Chewing, Aaron (Joseph) Duvall, Jon Esau, Vern Hyndman, Mary (Alexandra) Marintzer, Kurt McDonald, Kristen Poljansek, Aubrey Smith, Lee Waldron, and Joseph Wuest.

Books on the habits of Jesus have been plentiful (*The Jesus Habits*, *Habits of Grace*, *7 Habits of Jesus*, etc.). Since I had already done one book on how Jesus ate good food with bad people (*From Tablet to Table*), I gave Michael Waddell’s idea of another “bad” book (i.e., bad habits) a standing observation when my agent, Mark Sweeney, gave it a standing ovation and kept clapping until I said yes to the project. Magriet Smit cheered me on daily while I was writing this over Christmas and reminded me that what loomed in front of me as one of the Alps could be an anthill if I approached it differently.

On January 28, 2016, I announced on my Facebook timeline that I was finishing up writing this book, and I invited people to submit their own nominations for the bad habits of Jesus. I then said that the ones I picked would be part of the book in some way, a new authorial device called *crowd-sourcing*. So their entries on my timeline were also their permissions to use their quotes in the book. The response to my invitation was a flood. I have lifted out some of the ones that were the most provocative and the least covered in the book. Thanks to all my coauthors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Laughter does so much good for the body, mind, and spirit that you should call those who make you laugh your doctors. The doctor is always in when Landrum Leavell III is around. If you think Jesus turns his followers into sourpusses and crab apples, you need to meet Landrum. Lori Wagner is my right arm, left brain, and demolitions expert. She has edited everything I have written for the past seven years (as well as co-authored a novel with me) and was able to fit this bad-habits bombshell into her already-crowded schedule. When a metaphor misfires, that's on me. But there would be a lot more sputtering and lurching, and some loss-of-limb explosions in the political minefield that is language, without her roadside clearings and disarmings of my mindless metaphorical IEDs.

I finished this book while speaking twice a day in Kerala, India, at the Maramon Convention (2016), sponsored by the Mar Thoma Syrian Church. For me this annual camp-meeting, the largest gathering of Christians in Asia (150,000–200,000), was a way of following in the footsteps of one of my missionary heroes, E. Stanley Jones. I have already dedicated a book to him. I now dedicate this book to my traveling companion in India, Anne Mathews-Younes, the granddaughter of E. Stanley Jones. In two weeks of traveling together I could not find even a sliver of a bad habit, much less a single one. I hope, now that I've dedicated this book to her, she won't reveal my multitude of badnesses.

Leonard Sweet

ORCAS ISLAND

PENTECOST SUNDAY, 2016



**A TROUBLING HOPE
FOR A TROUBLED WORLD**

INTRODUCTION

Jesus is God's way of getting rid of a bad reputation.

JOHN KILLINGER

EVEN THOUGH JESUS was God's Son, he had habits and behaviors that were considered bad in the eyes of the culture of his day. Some of them seem wrong even today. All of Jesus' "bad habits," however, reveal truths about God's love and message that are vital for us.

Some of these bad habits were seen as sins against the Torah. Some were bad habits of hygiene and holiness. In this book, we will explore the words and actions of Jesus, those that his religious culture considered offensive, and reframe them for a twenty-first-century world using fresh metaphors and contemporary language.

Would Jesus offend you today? If not, you are missing the scandalous nature of Jesus the rabble-rousing rabbi as told in the stories of the Gospels. Jesus revealed a God who has gone to great trouble over every person in every corner of the world. No one is not worth God's trouble. That is why Jesus came to trouble us with the truth: that it is only in

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being “bad” in the eyes of the world that we can be “good” in the eyes of God.

Teresa of Ávila once heard Christ say to her in prayer, “See yourself in me.” When we find ourselves in Christ, we start to find Christ in ourselves and in each other. Life falls into place when Jesus gets first place. Life is what you make it. Abundant life is what Jesus makes it. Only a right relationship with Christ will right the world.

And a good way to get that relationship started and keep it going is to make his habits our own. Even his bad habits. *Especially* his bad habits.



JESUS SPIT

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE ORIGINAL FILM VERSION of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Willy Wonka gives Mrs. Teevee a rainbow drop and encourages her to suck on it and then spit to see the rainbow of colors. Violet, who later would have to be rolled to the juicing room, tells Wonka, “Spitting’s a dirty habit!”

She’s right, of course. Just ask your mother. Or ask the Chinese, whose bureaucrats have been on a sustained campaign against public spitting. Spitting in public has been against the law in numerous US states and is still on the books in five of them.

In Jesus’ day, spitting was equally obnoxious. It was a

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gross insult to spit at someone, in someone's presence, or especially in someone's face. It was rude to spit on the ground in front of a person. We see the impact and insult of spitting in Jesus' humiliation by the guards,¹ and in the Hebrew Scriptures as well.²

I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

ISAIAH 50:6



As strange as it may seem, Jesus spit. Jesus used spit on three different occasions in conjunction with a healing. The most unusual usage was when he used spit to make mud and applied it to a blind man's eyes, giving new meaning to the phrase "as clear as mud." While his followers busied themselves with the theology behind the man's suffering, Jesus busied himself giving the blind sight.³

Imagine the shock—or perhaps not—when Jesus faced the man and spat upon the ground. Perhaps everyone around him was nodding in approval, thinking that Jesus was obviously showing his contempt for the outcast Jew. But then Jesus did the unthinkable. He reached down, gathered up the spittle and some dirt, made a poultice of mud, and then applied the clay to the man's eyes.

From a gesture of insult, Jesus created a magnificent and powerful blessing. And isn't that how God works anyway?

The origin of Jesus' actions can be seen in Genesis 2,

JESUS SPIT

when God creates humankind from earth and water, all originating from the mouth of God. God speaks in Genesis 1:26: “Let us make humankind in our image” (NRSV).

Now no shrub had yet appeared on the earth and no plant had yet sprung up, for the LORD God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no one to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground. Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.⁴

Jesus’ healings spit in the eye of tradition and illuminate the truth of God’s love even for the outcasts. Jesus’ spit is also a sign of his messianic identity and his relationship to the Grand Potter, the Creator of all things, the Giver of life, and the Restorer of the human condition. Jesus does not lord it over others from above but stays close to the earth in his stories, in his language, in his imagination, and in his reasoning.

Jesus’ bad habit is a reminder to us that sometimes in order to incarnate Jesus within a blind and confusing world,

MORE BAD HABITS

Spitting on people (tongue and eyes with mud)—I bet he healed ears with wet willies!

ALLEN GRIFFIN

it means we need to touch some dirt and spit in order to channel Christ's healing and wholeness. You can't up-up-and-away in creativity and innovation without spending down-on-the-ground time in the muck and mire.

MORE BAD HABITS



When my mom would sweep the wood floors, she would always say, "Don't walk through my dirt!" Jesus is always walking through my dirt! (Dirty roads, dirty people.)

BARRY D. CRAM

Jesus' bad spitting habit is a reminder for us to take off our coats, spit on our hands, and get down and dirty in ministry and mission. For Jesus, dirtiness more than cleanliness is next to godliness. You might even call the twelve disciples the original Dirty Dozen. They were constantly being cajoled by

Jesus to get their hands dirty in the grime and slime of the world's misery and pain and to approach everyone they met as people moving toward a future that transcended their present—"it does not yet appear what we shall be."⁵ There is something *so* Jesus about the first Baptist church on English soil being founded at "Spitalfields" (in 1612).

For Jesus, clean hands reveal a dirty heart; dirty hands reveal a clean heart. In fact, our entry through the Pearly Gates may hinge on this question: "Let me see your hands. Have you gotten your hands dirty for the sake of the gospel?"

Truth came into the world—not abstract, pure, and anti-septic, but cradled in dirt, water, and mud, and mangled in

JESUS SPIT

mystery. The First Testament begins with a story about dirt and the first Adam: “God formed Man out of dirt from the ground.” The Second Testament begins with a story about dirt and the second Adam: “The Word became dirt.”⁶

Few stories are more deserving of documentaries and a movie than the story of Mama Heidi.⁷ After missionary Heidi Baker and her husband earned their PhDs, God told Heidi, “Sit in the dust.” She had no idea what that meant, but she prayed to be led. And God led her to a dump in Mozambique where she did what she was told and sat in the dust and dirt and there discovered her mission. Eventually she became a leading force in Mozambique for getting some seven thousand orphans adopted and ordaining six thousand pastors in the bush.

The gate to God swings open in every speck of dust. There are flowers in every dustbin, and dustups and dustheaps can be depositories of the divine.

An incredible movement of God began when Heidi Baker got down and dirty with God. How far down was God willing to go to lift us up? The filthiest parts of the human body in the first century were your feet. You could not even require slaves to wash their master’s feet. Yet Jesus showed how far down God was willing to go to reach us by getting on his hands and knees and washing his disciples’ feet. You don’t wash anyone’s feet without getting your hands dirty and wet.

When we get down and dirty, we hit pay dirt. Until we get our hands dirty and wet, until we can endure the spit, the grime, the mud, and the sludge of humanity’s poor, sick,

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and dying, we can't be the "Potter's hands" of renewal and restoration for a dry and dusty world.

For Jesus the glamour is always in the grime. Jesus turns humus into humans, dirt into miracles, mud galoshes into miracles galore. The spittle of Jesus is the water of life to a hurting world. Only Jesus can create wholeness and restore us to the human beings we were meant to be. As the church we can be Jesus to the world, but only if we are not afraid of the spit and the dirt. To lose our earthiness is to lose our humility, which, in the end, is to lose our humanity.

God made the first Adam out of dirt and water. God brought the second Adam into the world upon a dirt floor amid the drool of animals. And God continues to manifest God's presence, power, and healing wherever Jesus is to be found through his human bride, the church.

Even today, God still turns dirt into grass, dirt into glass, dirt into diamonds, dirt into divinity. Because of Jesus, the last Adam, wherever sin and loss is present, God has the power to remake us and restore us out of "Godspit," God's own flesh and blood rebreathed by life-giving Spirit.⁸ In a sense, this is our baptism—from the waters of the depths of the womb, we emerge filled with the "living waters" of God within us.

And no one is ever too far gone to be remade, reformed, revisioned, restored by the heavenly Potter. Without the breath (and spittle) of God, we are mere broken and lifeless clay. But when the waters of the Holy Spirit flow upon us, we can be anything God wants us to be.

When our hymn writers wanted to convey that we're all

JESUS SPIT

*All go to one place. All are from the dust,
and to dust all return.*

ECCLESIASTES 3:20, ESV



dirt, they used spitfire metaphors like “wretch” and “worm.”⁹ As bad to our self-esteem as “wretch” and “worm” may be, the prophet Isaiah said that our righteousness is even worse: it is no better than soiled linen.¹⁰ That said, you don’t run away from the dirty laundry but face it. When Mary rushed toward a pile of soiled linen in the tomb, she bumped into an angel.

The gospel keeps your heart humble (heart in the kitchen), your head confident (head in the sky), and your hands courageous (hands in the dirt). As Paul says, “I can do all things [you can’t get more confident than that] through Christ [you can’t get more humble than that] who gives me courage.”¹¹

The world is afraid of touch, afraid of dirt, afraid of spit (at least spit that leaves the boundary of the body), afraid of seeing what we do not want to see. And yet there is usually no reproduction without the sharing of spit that we call kissing. It’s like that, too, with Jesus. It’s easy to love Jesus when it’s tidy, hip, and clean. It’s easier to donate money than to put our hand in the hand of a man or a woman who looks dirty, down, and drowned with mud. Yet the church of Jesus is not meant to be a hideaway but a hostel for all of God’s dirtiest who need restoration and healing.

Just because we are “earthen vessels” doesn’t mean we

need pampering, but we do need damping and molding. The God who created the heavens and the earth lived in an earthen vessel, a body, for thirty-three years. Jesus witnessed to the world God's blessing of the human body as the dwelling place of the fullness and holiness of God.

The Pharisees looked everywhere to things that pointed to the divine. Jesus looked everywhere to things that presented the divine. When nature sings God's praise and signs God's glory,¹² it is not God singing and God signing. God is singing through creation; creation is not singing as God. Now, many of us are like Jacob and sleep through the presence of God. When Jacob awoke from his dream, he thought, "Surely the LORD is in this

MORE BAD HABITS



Jesus insisted on washing his disciples' feet at suppertime but allowed some of them to skip out on hand washing before meals.

BETTY J. JACKSON

place, and I was not aware of it."¹³ For Jesus, spirituality was something "down to earth." It was from the ground up, not from the sky down. The best translation of Psalm 16:8 is not "I have set the LORD always before me" but "I am ever mindful of the LORD's presence."¹⁴

Proverbs 3:6 (RSV) reads, "In all your ways acknowledge [*da'ehu*, "know"] him." We give praise to God and deepen our relationship with God in everything we do, in every feature and function of human behavior, not just in explicitly holy acts. This is especially true in our relationships. When we draw near to each other (*qereb*), God

JESUS SPIT

approaches or draws near to us (*qarab*). Jesus says, “Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.”¹⁵

To be a preacher—and we are all preachers—is to look every day for unexpected pulpits from which to preach. And for Jesus a lot of these unexpected pulpits were found in creation.

The first production in England of Friedrich Schiller’s play *The Maid of Orleans*, a story about Joan of Arc, featured one of the greatest props ever conceived for the stage. While hugging close to Schiller’s original play, the producers added one new prop, the only prop used in the whole production. Joan of Arc sees a helmet just brought in from the battlefield and exclaims, “It is mine!” This helmet is a clump of wet clay molded around Joan’s head. It looks like a queen’s headdress, but it dirties the hands of all who touch it, who then leave muddy streaks everywhere they go.

Such are the saints in God’s Kingdom. A saint is both one who is pure and one who is tainted but who uses these “taints” to paint beauty, truth, and goodness—just as Jesus used his spit, his feet of clay, to make mud pies of healing for a maimed world.

To add bad habit upon bad habit, Jesus didn’t put conditions on his healing. When Jesus saw blind Bartimaeus, he asked him “What can I do for you?” Bartimaeus answered, “Give me back my sight.” Jesus gave him what he asked for. No questions asked; no conditions made. Jesus did not ask Bartimaeus to become his disciple, either to get the cure or to show gratitude for the cure. He was free to go his own way. Whereupon Bartimaeus followed Jesus.¹⁶