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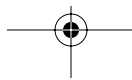
# Jesus

## THE PROVOCATIVE TEACHER



Ever notice how certain people seem to fill a room with their presence? They simply walk in and every eye turns their way. Sometimes this magnetism is due to an individual's athletic prowess or stunning appearance. For others, it's their ability to produce astounding wealth.

Growing up, Bill Gates was probably ignored in most settings—but not today. When Gates appears on the scene, people notice. *Money* magazine in May 2002 revealed that the Microsoft titan had amassed a fortune in cash: forty billion dollars, to be exact. To help us get a handle on that sum, *Money* explains that it's enough buying power to acquire Ford, Exxon, Mobil and Wal-Mart combined. Enough to purchase four space shuttles or to write a check for the entire U.S. airline industry—twice! Or he could use the money to buy every professional football, basketball, baseball and hockey team in America. Love him or hate him, Gates is a jaw-dropper because of his financial achievements.





Long before Michael Jordan amassed a financial empire on endorsements and advertisements, he was wowing audiences with his aerial acrobatics. My son still has a poster of His Airness above his desk. In the photo, Jordan is suspended in midair, hanging precariously between the foul line and the basket. He hovers with his eyes at rim level, arm stretched above his head gripping a basketball at the moment before he slams it through the net. In the background, the audience is transfixed, sharing one expression—awe. Hundreds of mouths hang open as MJ performs his superhuman display.

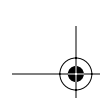
Sometimes sheer physical size draws attention. When we wanted a good laugh as kids, my friends and I would watch professional wrestling. Thirty years ago it hadn't achieved the near-X-rated status it boasts today; it was just plain dumb. We laughed hysterically at characters like George "the Animal" Steele, who slobbered and drooled in front of the camera, and Toro Tanaka, whose pregame ritual included throwing salt around the ring—salt he would later rub into the eyes of his unsuspecting victim.

We snickered at most of this charade, eagerly devouring bags of potato chips and sloshing down cans of pop. But suddenly we became silent, and our sneers gave way to expressions of wonder. There he was, and he was unbelievable.

His name was Andre the Giant, a seven-and-a-half-foot, 450-pound humanoid stuffed into a pair of wrestling tights. Each pant leg was the size of a sleeping bag. His head was as big as a microwave oven. This was the closet thing to Goliath we had ever seen. A sports magazine picture of this behemoth showed his hand cupped around a cola can—a can visible only through the cracks between his fingers.

Soon the fun would begin. A hapless wannabe would enter the arena to challenge the giant, and after just a few moments, Andre would toss him around like a rag doll. The crowd was divided—and





so was our fan club. Half wanted Andre to win; half cheered for the smaller David. But regardless of whose side we took, it was never boring when Andre was in the ring.

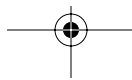
The list could go on—star athletes, business tycoons, entertainment divas, rock superstars. These are the people whose first names are part of our everyday vocabulary—Arnold, Oprah, “the Donald.” And love them or hate them, we can’t simply ignore them. They don’t get lost in the crowd; no one yawns when they enter the room.

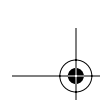
### ENCOUNTERING THE PROVOCATIVE TEACHER

Despite all the fanfare generated by famous stars and athletes, no one ever caused jaws to drop like Jesus. And no one ever divided a room more quickly than this prophet from Nazareth. It was not his wealth or size or physical ability that people noticed; he didn’t even have a permanent home. Certainly “he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him / nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). His redemptive power and grace, his authoritative teaching and nature-defying miracles, his unceasing love and abounding courage, turned heads and stirred deep emotions. His presence was unmistakable. People either loved him or hated him—but they never ignored him.

And neither can you.

Many people have read Jesus’ biographies in the Gospel accounts of the Bible, and they are particularly enamored with his teaching. If Jesus was anything, he was a provocative teacher. Some have tried to discount his claims and soften the raspy edge of his unnerving and passionate remarks. But it cannot be done without warping his message and ruining the picture of his true character.





“Much of the history of Christianity has been devoted to domesticating Jesus,” says Andrew Greeley, “to reducing that elusive, enigmatic, paradoxical person to dimensions we can comprehend, understand and convert to our own purposes. So far it hasn’t worked.” I couldn’t agree more. Regarding Jesus’ sayings, Greeley comments that they all “seem vague, slippery, disturbing and dangerous. Jesus is as disturbing now as he was in his own time: as troublesome, as much a threat to the public order.” Disturbing, provocative, enigmatic.

Not exactly the Jesus many of us grew up with, the cute Jesus frolicking among the sheep and handing out goodies to his kids like grandma with a jar of homemade Christmas cookies.

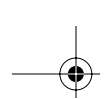
Don Everts, in his compelling and earthy book *Jesus with Dirty Feet*, describes the utterly unique presence and impact of Jesus as he bounded across the stage of world history in the first century A.D.

He was nothing like anyone had ever seen. There was something so clear and beautiful and true and unique and powerful about Jesus that old rabbis would marvel at his teaching, young children would run and sit in his lap, ashamed prostitutes would find themselves weeping at his feet, whole villages would gather to hear him speak, experts in the law would find themselves speechless, and people from the poor to the rugged working class to the unbelievably wealthy would leave everything . . . to follow him.

Jesus’ teaching was . . . provocative.

*Provocative.* The English word has its roots in the Latin *prōvocāre*, which means “to call forth.” To call forth action, response, thought. Similar in scope is the word *educate*, from *ēducāre*, which means “to lead out.” If we could describe Jesus’ teaching with terms like these, we might say he was “leading his students out”—out of timidity,





complacency, falsehood and self-absorption—and “calling them forth” to action. Jesus called followers to experience a new way of life in the kingdom of God: a life of love, community and wholeness.

With Christ as his model, Parker Palmer has argued, “To teach is to create a space where obedience to truth can be practiced.” Obedience is simply the process of aligning oneself with God’s reality. The word literally means “to listen from below,” implying a humility toward learning. Jesus, we might say, was a master at creating learning environments (spaces) in which truth was revealed so that it could be encountered, processed and practiced—in a word, obeyed. It was never Jesus’ intent to simply comfort or entertain his students. His Sunday sermons never left hearers saying, “Nice talk; I like the way Jesus told that story about the shepherd boy and the little sheep. Of course, his message did run a bit long this week.”

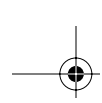
Not a chance. When Jesus was speaking, the room split into two groups—those who longed to hear him again, and those who wanted to run him out of town. His message portrayed a ruddy realism, the kind that fishermen and tax collectors and centurions could understand. Inspiring . . . convicting . . . provocative.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7:28-29)

Thus the people were divided because of Jesus. (John 7:43)

Let’s look closely at this provocative teacher, this disturbing and heart-rending communicator. But first, a caution. It can be tempting to simply dissect Jesus’ words, much like the religious and political elite of his day. Of course, it’s okay to begin there, to pick his teaching apart, slice his words into pieces with our exegetical scalpels and

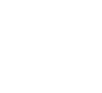
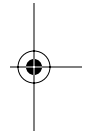


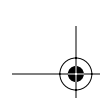


scrutinize them under a literary microscope. But if we stop there we fall prey to an old trap—gathering knowledge to satisfy our curiosity or, worse, harnessing information to be used as a sword for intellectual jousting matches with friends or critics. We may win the war of words or congratulate ourselves on our ability to think deeply, but in reality, we lose either way. We will find ourselves forever parsing the message yet never encountering the messenger. I have been there—and it is a cold, stale place to be.

In a New Testament class in seminary, we were studying 1 Corinthians 13, the “love chapter.” The substitute professor that day was caught off-guard by a question, and soon we were off on a rabbit trail, miles away from the point of the passage. “What are the tongues of angels, and what do they sound like?” the student asked, referring to verse 1. For forty minutes students offered a variety of possibilities based on their personal study of the text. There were seven scholarly views on the subject, if I recall correctly, and we debated every one of them. I found myself sucked into the controversy. When the class ended, the irony struck me. How foolish. No one knows what the tongue of an angel sounds like. That’s not the point. 1 Corinthians 13 is about love. Yet I and others had become clanging cymbals, each of us clamoring to prove our point while ignoring the love we had been called to embrace. We overlooked love, and never encountered the Lover.

So I have a challenge for you. Try to approach Jesus’ teaching by reaching beyond the purely analytical toward the conversational and even the transformational. Ignore the minutiae. Courageously ask, “What is my response to this? How do I react when Jesus teaches this way? What questions do I have for him? How does this teaching provoke me to action, anger, sadness, frustration or perhaps awe? Do I find myself moving toward Jesus, or turning away? In either instance, why?”





If you authentically engage in dialogue with his story and his words, I suspect you will find yourself encountering the real Jesus. After all, he didn't just bring a message—he became the message. Or as Eugene Peterson translates it, “The Word became flesh and blood, / and moved into the neighborhood” (John 1:14 *The Message*).

As you read the stories of Jesus in the Bible, be aware that a few jaw-dropping experiences may lie ahead. Don't try to prepare for them; it will spoil the adventure. Just be present, available and attentive. In certain moments, perhaps when you least expect it, his words will leap off the page, prodding and provoking, calling you to act or to choose. “He who has an ear, let him hear” (Revelation 13:9).

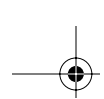
## THE TEACHER WHO SHATTERS OUR ILLUSIONS

*You have heard that it was said . . . But I say . . . (NRSV)*

One of my favorite teachers once proclaimed, “What we need is more disillusioned people in this world.” Hardly the words one would expect from a seasoned veteran of the classroom. Perhaps we need more responsible people. Or more intelligent people. Certainly more people who vote and pay taxes. But more disillusioned people? Hmmm, maybe this professor was moonlighting as a psychotherapist and needed clients.

But as he elaborated on his comment I knew he was right. We live in a world filled with illusions—some are physical, some mental, others spiritual. Thanks to advances in cosmetic surgery, for instance, if we don't like what we see we can hide it, stretch it, tighten it, tuck it, remove it, enhance it and replace it—all in the same day. We can gently spoon-feed our illusions to ourselves or indulge in full-fledged





fantasies of unending health, limitless prosperity and eternal beauty, avoiding the inner poverty and despair that often map our souls.

Illusions allow us to erect a safe and comfortable façade. And if we cannot fund our masquerade with existing financial resources, we can maintain the hoax by borrowing money we don't have to buy stuff we don't need to impress people we don't know. And on it goes. Unfortunately, like a silk burial shroud, these skin-level accouterments only provide a glamorous covering for a decaying interior. Our cosmetic and monetary enhancements are vain attempts to flee the real truth about life and death, about weakness and insecurity.

The Pharisees in Jesus' day needed a strong dose of disillusionment. They viewed themselves as righteous and pure, their perfectionist noses high above the riffraff that made up the multitudes around them. But when they encountered Jesus, he took aim at their false piety and began shattering their self-righteous illusions.

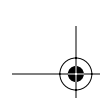
Woe to you [Pharisees], because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it. (Luke 11:44)

When it comes to illusions, Jesus is on a search-and-destroy mission. His teaching rips away the surface garments, exposing the real fabric beneath.

**Three little words.** Jesus' most popular itinerant message, the Sermon on the Mount, was designed to destroy the self-righteous "at least I'm better than the next guy" attitude that prevailed in his day. The Pharisees may have embodied this mindset, but everyone shared in the charade. Each time Jesus spoke the words, "You have heard that it was said," people in the crowd began to nod in agreement. *You tell 'em Jesus! Let those sinners have it. Tell it like it is! Lay down the law. No holds barred; no punches pulled. Wow, this is my kind of teacher!*

But as soon as they began celebrating their sin-management strat-





egies—having avoided any really *big* blunders like murder or adultery—Jesus rocked their worlds with three simple but arresting words: “But I say . . .” (NRSV).

Three disturbing words; three unnerving words. “But I say . . .”

These three words meant “Pay attention! What’s coming next will leave your head spinning and your heart trembling. I’m about to turn your world upside down and give you a reality check.”

Read Matthew 5—7 and you will discover that part of Jesus’ sermon contains a string of unrelenting exposés that leave his audience either stunned and confused or seething with anger. Here are a few provocative statements from Matthew 5 that landed on the listening crowd.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, “You shall not murder.”

*But I say* to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.”

*But I say* to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

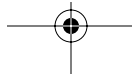
You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

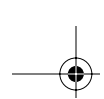
*But I say* to you, Do not resist an evildoer.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.”

*But I say* to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (NRSV, emphasis added)

Each time the provocative teacher speaks, the structures of conventional wisdom that protect our illusions come crashing to the ground. It should not surprise us. In that day his words separated





friends, split families and shocked followers. Every time he taught he was sparring with prevailing opinion. If a man takes your jacket from you—give him your shirt as well, he says. If someone strikes you on the cheek, turn the other toward him. Love your enemies; bless those who persecute you. Lend to those who cannot pay you back.

I remember encountering these statements for the first time and thinking that they were powerful words—poignant, clear and amazingly simple. But quickly my emotions caught up with my analysis. I wondered if these attitudes could really work in this world, or whether Jesus was even remotely in touch with reality. I found myself asking, “Is Jesus aware that my coworker is taking credit for my ideas? Does this first-century rabbi realize that throwing money to people who can’t pay it back displays not only poor business judgment but exposes people to financial suicide? And what kind of defense policy would our nation have if we took cheek-turning seriously?”

But there I stood—face to face with Jesus and his teaching. No answers came. No easy way to reconcile these commands with my logic. His unsettling words pounded at my preconceived notions of reality like the ocean waves that relentlessly battered the New Jersey shoreline I frequented as a youth. And I kept mulling over those three little words—words that ambushed a hillside crowd two thousand years ago, words that still challenge the spiritual status quo.

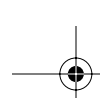
“You have heard that it was said . . . but I say . . .”

When I encounter Jesus’ teaching, I find my illusions shattering like glass on a tile floor. Here are some of them:

*If I follow God, he will keep me healthy.*

*My kids will grow up loving God because we pray with them every night.*





*If I love my neighbor, she will respond in friendship.*

*God helps those who help themselves.*

*Christians deserve a better place in life.*

*If I study hard and get good grades, colleges will beg me to apply.*

*If God wants us to move, he will help us sell our home quickly.*

*I can manage my greed and lust on my own.*

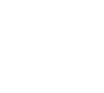
*After all I have done for God, he should give me a little slack.*

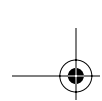
I hate to admit thoughts like these. And I would die wallowing in them if I had never encountered the provocative teacher who cared enough to smash my self-centered illusions in order to show me a deeper reality. One that draws me to depend on his mercy and long for his grace.

As we encounter Jesus, the provocative and unsettling teacher, we have a choice. When his words agitate our emotions or prompt deep reflection, how do we respond? It would be easy to walk away, or to think, *Okay, I'm not perfect. Nobody is. Can we move on with life?* But if we allow the process to take root, we can pursue the kind of kingdom life Jesus is calling forth in us. The kind he is provoking. We can allow our illusions of truth and reality to crumble before us, giving way to a new way of thinking. In doing so, we might see God begin to act in amazing ways in our lives, and in the world around us.

#### PERSONAL RESPONSE

*Examine your heart right now. Does the thought of having your illusions shattered produce fear or freedom? It's risky business. He might stand your world on end.*





☼ DIALOGUE WITH GOD

*God, I am often unnerved by Jesus' teaching. It startles me and I feel uneasy. My soul becomes unsettled, yet I admit that certain desires emerge. Desires to discover deeper truth about you and about me. I know you are trying to break through. If you must shatter some illusions along the way, have at it. I am listening. I am ready to be taught. But you might find me a difficult student at times. So help me overcome my petty insecurities and preoccupations with my version of reality, and let me see the real world and the real Jesus. That is what I ask today.*

☼ FURTHER BIBLE READING

*Matthew 5—7*



THE TEACHER WHO RENEWS OUR MINDS

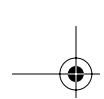
*He told them many things in parables.*

Great teachers not only dispel myths and shatter illusions, great teachers make you think. Whether you want to or not.

My seventh-grade science instructor was well liked. After all, science class is a junior high boy's dream—minor chemical explosions to watch, frogs to dismember, and field trips to swamps and museums to take. Everything we loved—and everything our moms tried to keep us from—was in that science room. It was a veritable wonderland, furnished with scalpels, scissors, ropes, electrical wires, oil, glue and dead amphibians soaking in formaldehyde. Now there's a smell that camps out in the nostrils for life.

One day our teacher calmly entered the room, walked past a dozing student and placed a glass beaker on a desk in the center of the





room. The beaker was half filled with water. For a moment he stared at the beaker. Then he gave us a set of simple instructions.

“Take out your journals,” he said. “Turn to a blank page and then, in groups of four, record seventy-five observations of this.” He pointed to the beaker.

We looked at each other for a moment. Teachers relish these moments, when students aren’t sure whether they’re being toyed with or whether this will be on the final exam. The silence was broken when a brazen student—try to guess his name—offered the first observation. “Okay, here’s one. I see a glass of water sitting on the table.” A ripple of chuckles moved across the room. Chalk one up for the students!

“Nice try, Mr. Donahue, but you have misunderstood the assignment. That was an interpretation, not an observation.”

As the laughter subsided, he continued, “Observations would sound something like this: ‘There is a small cylindrical object sitting on a flat surface. The object appears to contain a clear liquid.’ And so on.”

Now gripped by the gravity of the task before us, we began to calculate how much mental effort would be required to generate seventy-five of these statements. A collective sigh filled the room.

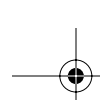
“You may begin,” the teacher said. “We’ll stop in forty minutes.” He sat down at his desk as my group began struggling to fill our first page.

Mercifully, after what seemed like forty days, the bell rang and we closed our journals. “Well, I hope you got off to a good start,” the teacher said. A good *start*? “Tomorrow when you come in, you can continue the work by making another seventy-five observations.”

So much for wonderland. By the end of the second day, one student had recorded 225 observations, and we plotted his demise, thinking of creative ways to use the ever-pungent formaldehyde. But the smell deterred us. So did the prospect of twenty years in jail.

I learned something in those two days. Observations come to





those who ask. And the person who asks the most questions wins. Whether we liked it or not, our teacher was training us to think like scientists—to ask, to observe, to record our findings. He wanted us to observe phenomena before interpreting what we saw—or thought we saw. (Was it really water, or was it liquid nitrogen? Was the beaker glass or plastic?) He knew that we students saw what we were conditioned to see, making rash judgments before taking in the data, and he wanted to change those habits. So does Jesus.

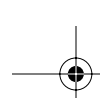
Our minds operate according to a set of assumptions that influence how we observe and interpret truth. In order for our minds to think clearly, they must be cleansed and refreshed—renewed—so that we can receive deeper, transforming truth. So that we can look beyond snap judgments and surface observations.

Jesus was a master at mind renewal. He knew that the mind was the portal through which we process and apply truth. But truth is accessible only to the receptive mind. The student must be willing to learn. Truth can't be stuffed into the brain like the fifteenth pair of socks in a drawer that holds ten. An old Chinese proverb states, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." But how do we know if we really want to learn? Are we ready for the mysteries of the kingdom? Can we handle the whole truth? Like youngsters learning to read, when will we be done with picture books and ready for volumes of prose and poetry, imagination and reflection?

Parables functioned as mind-renewing tools in the teaching repertoire of Jesus. His artful weaving of truth and story, of reality and simplicity, silenced foes and stunned seekers. He used parabolic lessons to make people think differently about God's kingdom and to test their receptivity to kingdom perspectives.

The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and





mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough. . . .

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

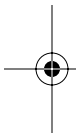
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:33, 44-46)

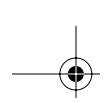
These sayings brought light to the eyes of seekers but cast a veil of darkness over critics and cynics, hiding the truth under a shroud of mystery. Their minds became dull because their hearts had become hard. As a result they saw only “a glass of water sitting on a table.” They missed the opportunity to look beyond the obvious.

This is why I speak to them in parables:

“Though seeing, they do not see;  
though hearing, they do not hear or understand. . . .  
For this people’s heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.” (Matthew 13:13-15)

Understand . . . turn . . . and be healed. Amazing. Spiritual healing comes to those who allow their hearts to be renewed so that they understand, and who turn from misguided perceptions in the process of repentance. So first I ask myself, *Am I ready for such a turn? Is my mind prepared to pierce through the layers of confusion, doubt and cyni-*





*cism that cloud my spiritual senses? These are tough questions for each of us. How do we answer them?*

There is only one way to find out. Take the parable test. Read the sayings of the always-provoking, ever-disturbing teacher. Is the hidden truth breaking through? If so, will you allow it to shape your thoughts and renew your mind? If the truth does not crystallize before your eyes and remains difficult to find, all is not lost—unless you give up the search. In Jesus' parables, treasure hunters become treasure finders. The seeker is rewarded; the critic goes home empty-handed (or empty-headed, as the case may be). So remember, the one who asks the most questions wins.

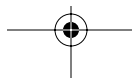
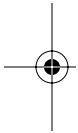
#### ✠ PERSONAL RESPONSE

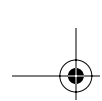
*Why is it difficult to see things as Jesus describes? His world seems to run on an entirely different operating system, and our hardware is not compatible with his software. Think—really think—for a moment. What would it take for our hearts and minds to synchronize with that of Jesus?*

#### ✠ DIALOGUE WITH GOD

*Oh God, sometimes your message is hard to understand and even harder to follow. Other times it flows freely into my mind, changing the way I see my world, my soul and my relationship to you. Open the eyes of my heart, I ask today. Renew my mind.*

*This is dangerous, but I want to take a risk. I am praying a bold prayer. Move me from cynic to skeptic and from skeptic to spiritual seeker. I have a thirst for truth and knowledge about you—and if that leads me to a deeper knowledge of you, then take me there. I am eager to have my mind renewed. Go ahead. Please let me see what I cannot now, so that I can become what I cannot be without you. That is what I ask today.*





✠ FURTHER BIBLE READING

*Matthew 13:1-43*

THE TEACHER WHO EXPOSES OUR MOTIVES

*Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said . . .*

We all like to think we have the best intentions when we deal with relationships. As Jean Vanier says, “While we are alone, we could believe we loved everyone.” Indeed. Our self-deception often runs deep when it comes to motives.

I was part of a small group in which one of our members described a desperate situation and appealed to the group for help. A man had run out on his wife, leaving the woman, three children and no income behind. He wondered if we could take care of some of her needs while she found a job and got back on her feet. Some of us decided to mow her lawn that summer. One very hot and humid day I was sweating behind the mower when this running dialogue began in my head.

“Where is the woman who lives here? Every time we come, she’s not home.”

*Why do you need to know?*

“Because I’d just like to see her. I’ve never met her.”

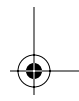
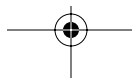
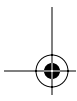
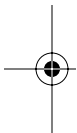
*But why do you need to see her?*

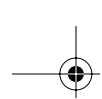
Then Jesus revealed my motives.

“Because I want to be thanked.”

*Why do you need to be thanked? Can’t you serve her in secret as I have taught you?*

I remember feeling embarrassed, but suddenly I realized God was





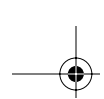
changing me in that moment. What were my real motives for helping people? Did I need recognition, money, a gift or a “thank you”? Was it not enough to simply serve this needy person? Those questions—questions about my real motives—sent me on an inward journey. I had to get at the root of this need for recognition. That encounter with Jesus behind a lawnmower on a hot summer day began to transform me, and I am still growing as a result of it.

We are all capable of motives that are less than pure. Sure, there are a few moments when we shine, when the other guy is more important and self-promotion takes a back seat to self-denial. But too often, the only guy we really care about greets us every morning in the mirror. Whether we are naive about our own darkness or we cunningly manipulate the system to our own ends, self-preservation is the supreme objective. More often than not, it's all about us.

One day Jesus' closest followers were engaged in a lively debate while walking with him to Capernaum, a city on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. Just days earlier two amazing events had transpired. First, Jesus had taken Peter, James and John, his three closest disciples, to a mountain where he was supernaturally transfigured in their midst as Moses and Elijah, fresh from their heavenly domain, stood alongside. Talk about an encounter! But despite the miraculous appearance of these Old Testament heroes, God the Father spoke in no uncertain terms about who was the center of attention: “This is my Son, listen to him!” Lesson number one: Jesus is the greatest prophet, teacher and hero—he is the chosen Son of God. Any questions? Good.

Now the second event. After coming down from the mountain, Jesus had encountered a mute boy who was suffering endless torment at the hands of a relentless and sinister spirit. Fits and seizures marked his waking moments, causing him to thrash about wildly or fall into a rigid, corpse-like stupor. At the words of Jesus, the spirit





fled and the boy became whole and alert, fully healed. The disciples were dumbfounded. Just moments earlier they had tried but failed to eradicate this same spirit. “This kind can come out only by prayer,” counseled Jesus (Mark 9:29). You cannot win spiritual battles with physical resources. Again, the attention is on Jesus.

Lesson two: Jesus has power and authority over the forces of evil. Any questions? Good.

After these two remarkable events, what topic might the disciples have been discussing as they walked to Capernaum?

Despite what they had just witnessed, the disciples were bickering with each other, asking, “Who among us is the greatest?” In other words, “Who will get the best seats at the table when Jesus sets up his government? Who’s at the top of the Jesus-follower food chain?” It must have been quite a discussion. I wonder if it went something like this:

*JUDAS: Jesus trusts me with the money purse, so it’s clear I’m the greatest.*

*JAMES: No, it’s me, because Jesus called me a “son of thunder.”*

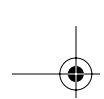
*PETER: He only calls you that because you snore so loud! You’re both wrong; I’m the greatest. Jesus called me “the rock” and said I would lead his church some day.*

*JOHN: Yeah—then ten minutes later he called you “Satan” and said, “Get behind me.” Get a grip on reality, Peter.*

*BARTHOLOMEW: Does anyone have an extra bagel?*

Finally they arrived at Capernaum and entered the home where they would lodge. To strip away their self-righteous veneer and reveal the pride that lay rotting beneath, Jesus asked a simple, soul-search-





ing question. “What were you arguing about on the road?” A deafening silence filled the room. Heads tilted downward. Everyone avoided eye contact and secretly hoped Jesus would break the uncomfortable silence with a less threatening question. Not a chance. The silence dug its heels in and didn’t budge an inch. Matthew cleared his throat. Philip stroked his shaggy beard. Andrew nervously crossed his arms—again. It was sure getting warm under those togas. Not a word was spoken.

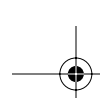
In this uncomfortable moment, just when they thought Jesus might probe no further, he went straight for the heart. “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and servant of all.” Then, to drive home the point, he used a vivid illustration. The master teacher grabbed a prop—a living one. A picture might be worth a thousand words, but a flesh-and-blood human being is a talking encyclopedia. The historian Luke records the moment.

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest.” (Luke 9:47-48)

A series of questions may have flashed through the disciples’ minds. “What are my true motives? Do I want to serve others or manipulate them? Am I willing to humble myself like this child? Does the kingdom really work this way? If it does, can I ever hope to make it through the front gates?”

When our motives are exposed and we sit there vulnerable in the presence of the Holy One, what are our options? Denial? Excuses? Pretense? Hiding? Or would it be better to simply say, “That’s me. I’m not proud of it, but it’s part of who I am.” Granted, it’s an unnerving





experience. To stand exposed before perfection leaves us ashamed and overwhelmed. But in the presence of Jesus, who knows our deepest thoughts and takes great pleasure in reshaping our darkest motives, we experience relief, freedom and joy.

And that's not a bad place to be—deeply known and fully loved.

#### ✦ PERSONAL RESPONSE

*What really motivates you—money, ego, love, pride, compassion, pain, fear? What drives you to act and think the way you do? If God could re-shape any of your motives, where might he begin?*

#### ✦ DIALOGUE WITH GOD

*Jesus, I do not care for this introspective work. It's easier to groom the outside of my life than to clean up the inner world. I need you to teach me how to act, feel and think in life-giving ways. But I know that means you will poke around in places I wish to keep hidden. And you will find some junk—including that mirror I keep on the nightstand of my soul, just so I can remember who's most important in my life. Oh, I am so ashamed sometimes. Will you still love me if you really know me? I'm counting on it. That's my prayer.*

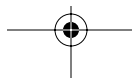
#### ✦ FURTHER BIBLE READING

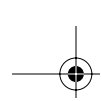
Mark 8:31—9:37

### THE TEACHER WHO CONFRONTS OUR UNBELIEF

*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*

Trust. Belief. Rare commodities in Jesus' day, but even harder to find today. We are experiencing a credibility crisis that has touched every





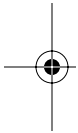
arena of life, from government and sports to business, entertainment, medicine, law, education and the church. University athletic programs are being investigated for NCAA violations, prominent corporations are scrutinized for fraud and accounting abuses, professional athletes are on trial for everything from sexual misconduct to murder, politicians are being chastised for breaking promises and mishandling tax dollars, church leaders are facing charges of sexual abuse, countless university students admit to cheating on exams, and police and firefighters are on the hot seat for fueling racial injustice. We need something to believe in, but where do we turn? Inevitably we begin to wonder, *Can anyone be trusted? Is there anyone left to believe in?*

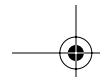
When I was dating my lovely wife, Gail, I enjoyed discovering facts about her life—her past experiences, her youth in Panama, her work at IBM, her family and so on. But in order to really know her I had to take a step of faith. I had to trust her, to believe in her. I had to risk some self-disclosure and vulnerability. So finally I did it. I gave her my laundry. Really.

One night Gail wanted to get together for coffee, but I was just starting a load of wash that I had to get done. (I couldn't afford last month's strategy—buy another package of underwear and a new pair of jeans.) So she said, "Well, why don't you bring it over here and we can get some coffee and do it together." *Laundry? Together?*

I felt awkward but said yes because I hated doing laundry. I hated powdered soap, hot, stuffy laundromats, people who monopolized the place by separating their fabrics and colors until there were four items in each machine. Of course, I used the single man's guide to laundry separation—whites in one machine, everything else in the other. Repeat every thirty days.

So Gail and I did laundry. And I wondered whether she would still



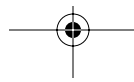


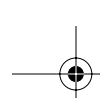
want to date me afterward. It's a vulnerable thing for a guy, letting a girl do his laundry—we can make some unsightly messes. But in a strange way it showed that there was trust, enough belief in each other and the progress of the relationship that this would be fun, not weird. And I realized that she was making a statement of trust and belief as well, getting involved in a personal area of my life that was neither glamorous nor exciting. After all, presoaking whites and spraying stain remover on grass stains is not like going to dinner and a show or taking a romantic walk through the arboretum. But in a silly way sharing the laundry marked a moment, a next step in the relationship. It made it safer for us to share more of our lives with each other.

Belief and trust are essential to intimacy and self-disclosure. The more we feel trusted and believed in, the more we are willing to reveal and the more we understand each other. I had to risk vulnerability and let Gail into my world. I had to believe she would honor me in the process—even when I did not have the facts to support that assumption. If we had waited to gather all the information, we'd never have gotten married.

When belief is absent and trust breaks down, skepticism creeps into a relationship, closely followed by a pervasive and debilitating cynicism. Doubt becomes the prevailing attitude, and we spend much of our emotional energy looking over our shoulder or behind our back. Once doubt reigns, it's hard to reweave the fabric of trust. It produces an endless cycle of uncertainty, hesitation, mistrust and suspicion. Everyone and everything is suspect. And that's dangerous.

Mark Buchanan describes the ultimate effect. "Here lies the basic flaw of all doubt: it can never really be satisfied. No evidence is ever fully, finally enough. Doubt wants always to consume, never to consummate. It clamors endlessly for an answer and so drowns out any answer that might be given it."





That's why Jesus talked so much about belief. Belief, not incessant doubting, opens the door to a knowledge deeper than facts can ever reveal. Though knowledge often produces a foundation for belief, like facts in a court case, it's also true that we must believe in order to discover true knowledge, particularly interpersonal knowledge.

We can study facts about Jesus all day—and there are plenty. But to know him more deeply we must risk believing some things: that we can actually have a relationship with God, that he is good, that he has our deepest interests at heart, that he can be trusted with our pain and shame, that he cares about our future, that he has incredible plans for us.

Belief is crucial to any growing relationship, and entering the company of Jesus is no different. With Jesus, belief is everything.

Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. (John 20:29)

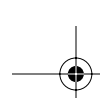
Everything is possible for him who believes. (Mark 9:23)

The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent. (John 6:29)

Whatever it is that fuels our unbelief, Jesus says it must be confronted. A persistent orientation of unbelief will harden the heart and put distance between us and him, ultimately hindering his work in us. Mark 6:5-6 says that when Jesus was in his hometown, "he could not do any miracles there. . . . And he was amazed at their lack of faith." Sad. The people of Nazareth never saw the mysterious and amazing work of God simply because they were unwilling to believe. He was willing to open his life and ministry to them, but like many of us, they chose to wallow in doubt.

Why do we often remain in disbelief? Why are we more like





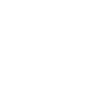
Doubting Thomas than Daring Peter? Perhaps it's the thrill of the hunt; we like to pursue answers to complex issues and problems more than we like to receive the answers themselves. But more likely unbelief is a cover, a smoke screen, a captivating distraction. Sometimes it's easier to hide behind a mask of activity—intellectual activity, especially—rather than face the awkwardness of an uncomfortable or mysterious relationship. For habitual skeptics, no case is ever closed; no file is ever sealed.

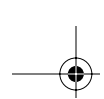
But can we ever uncover enough data to overcome our unbelief? There are no stop signs in cyberspace, just an endless stream of on-ramps crowded with merging facts, data, survey results, proof-texts and downloads. The addictive quest for information and statistics can actually obscure the discovery of truth. Don't get me wrong; God is interested in facts—in truth, data, evidence—but not in facts alone. Data will point only to some forms of knowledge. For relational truth, if we aspire to know and be known, we must reach beyond the facts into the realm of belief.

Are you willing to believe Jesus? To trust him with your dirty laundry? To let him see the messy parts of your life? To put his teachings to the test—even the difficult sayings? Belief will open up a whole new world, filled with life and discoveries and learning you never thought possible. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

#### ✿ PERSONAL RESPONSE

*Why is it so hard for us to take relational risks, to believe in the unseen and unknown? Is there a pattern of relating that keeps you from believing that God will not let you down? How did you get to this point?*





☼ DIALOGUE WITH GOD

*Jesus, I want desperately to believe in you—to believe that you are the life-giver. I also want to trust you with my life—to open up and invite you into the mess that I sometimes am. But I confess it is a dice roll. I have believed others only to be disappointed. My gut says you will not do the same, but my head cries, “Don’t fall for that again. You can’t believe anyone!” From all I can see, you are worth the risk. So help me. I believe . . . help my unbelief.*

☼ FURTHER BIBLE READING

*John 5:31-47*



THE TEACHER  
WHO PRODS OUR TRANSFORMATION

*Unless you change and become like little children,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*

When my daughter was four, our conversations went like this:

“Dad, what’s a menno?”

“A what?”

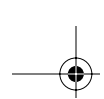
“A menno. That’s what you and Mommy say when you teach me the alphabet. Right in the middle you say, ‘J, K, L, a menno, P.’ So what’s a menno?”

When my daughter turned seven, she asked me, “How do we believe in something we don’t see?” She was skipping alongside me on a walk through our neighborhood.

“What made you ask that?” I said.

“Well, if there really is a God, why can’t we see him?”





Wow! My daughter was growing up fast. Now she had hard questions.

The next few minutes were amazing. While she skipped along the asphalt, I was walking on air, lost in the joy of a natural and effortless conversation. As I grasped her trusting hand we walked and talked, two pilgrims on the road to truth. We arrived home and sat on the bench under our magnolia tree, looking at the shimmering pond that lay across the road. We talked about how God reveals himself in true, easy-to-see ways in his people, his words and in his creation. It was a moment I will always treasure.

**Become like a child.** A child's questions are rooted in an honest, probing sincerity that dissipates much too rapidly as adulthood approaches. No pretense or hidden agenda, no posturing for position and power, not a hint of pharisaic manipulation designed to trap or befuddle. Just plain, simple and direct. Like the faith Jesus said is required to fully participate in the freedom-filled life of the kingdom.

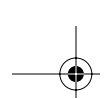
Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

Unless you change? Yes.

Matthew, the Gospel writer and an inner-circle friend of Jesus, uses a word that means "to turn around" or "to head in the opposite direction." It has the same root as our word *catastrophe*, which literally means "a turning down, an upheaval." Becoming childlike does not mean pursuing foolish ambition or shirking adult responsibility. Rather, it is a turning away from old patterns. It requires that we reject all that is superficial and pretentious, stripping away the corrosion from the surface of the soul to reveal the authentic inner self.

I'm telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to





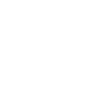
square one and start over like children, you're not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. (Matthew 18:3 *The Message*)

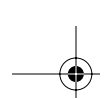
In other words, we need a catastrophic change of heart!

Few experiences rival the unabashed embrace of a child's greeting after a long trip or a frazzling day of work. "Mommy's home!" or "Daddy's back!" fills the air while thirty-two inches of rampaging joy comes bounding across the room at a hundred miles per hour. With unfettered faith this volcano of energy leaps fearlessly into your outstretched arms, shrink-wrapping herself against your body. In that moment—those few seconds you wish would last an eternity—you have a glimpse of what Jesus means. Your child was occupied and distracted by play or schoolwork when you entered the home. But soon she stops and turns at the sound of your voice, rushing into your safe, strong embrace, fully convinced of your incessant love.

Jesus longs for this from every child of his—a turn at the sound of his voice and the prompting of his truth. A turn that produces change. A turn that takes us back to our childlike roots. And, if necessary, a return to a private burial ground where we must exhume our decaying faith, hope and love from the cold ground. As Brennan Manning reminds us, we must return to a belief system that links truth with experience.

In contemporary Christianity there is an essential difference between belief and faith. Our religious beliefs are the visible expression of our faith, our personal commitment to the person of Jesus. However, if the Christian beliefs inherited from our family and passed on to us by our church tradition are not grounded in a shattering, life-changing experience of Jesus as the Christ, then the chasm between our creedal statements and



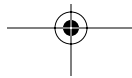


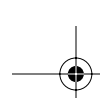
our own faith-experience widens and our witness is worthless. The gospel will persuade no one unless it has so convicted us that we are transformed by it.

*Transformation.* That's the buzzword of the age. Question: How many infomercials promise total transformation? Answer: All of them. It's the ultimate hook, the supreme come-on, the tantalizing bait dangled before every late-night tube watcher. "It will change your life. Just six minutes a day, three days a week. That's all. Try it for thirty days and if you're not satisfied, we'll refund your money." What's not to like about that deal? Change is easy and virtually guaranteed!

Who really wants to change their life? I'll tell you who—no one. Not really. Oh, we all think we want to change, or we would like the benefits of change, but few of us are committed to the process. I am the first to admit how difficult this is. Change is hard. So we become easy prey for the "change without pain" strategies pitched our way. (Which is why we all have some piece of exercise equipment gathering dust in the dark recesses of the garage or attic, ripening up for the next garage sale.)

We need transformation, but we cannot change ourselves by ourselves. Therein lies the paradox. We need help. Jesus promises to transform us from the inside out, but here's the deal—we have to become like kids while he does the work of God. His part is easy, because he's God. Our part is difficult because it requires humility and vulnerability, something few of us majored in at college. But it can be done if we cultivate a willing and obedient heart that makes the effort to be receptive to the work of God. It's a divine and mysterious partnership. "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling," wrote Paul to a young church, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12-13).





It requires effort for maturing adults to pursue spiritual growth while taking on the inquisitive posture of a child. In order to change in this way, we listen carefully to others on the faith journey toward Christ, we read the Bible with enthusiasm and worship God with a sense of wonder and awe, we ask his Spirit to change us, we pay attention to his promptings and we serve others humbly. In effect, we joyfully position ourselves in the places and activities where God is at work, and we strive to remain there against every distraction that would woo us away.

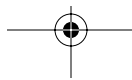
I am reminded of a commercial from the 1980s. It was an advertisement promoting travel to Jamaica, and it portrayed the fun, excitement, laughter and freedom available to anyone longing for a tropical getaway. The ad ended with these words, spoken with a Jamaican accent: “Come to Jamaica—and become a child again.”

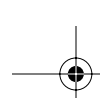
Jesus’ words are similar, but his promise is much more profound. Instead of promoting a temporary lifestyle, Jesus offers an amazing way of life. In place of a brief stay at a tropical playland, he invites us to spend forever in a heavenly paradise. Instead of simply treating us like kings, he offers the keys to the kingdom. It’s all ours, free of charge, including airfare. There’s only one condition: “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Luke 18:16-17).

C’mon, let’s go. Come to Jesus—and become a child again.

### PERSONAL RESPONSE

*What is standing in the way of change for you? Is it an attitude, a habit or the consequences of a poor decision? Do you believe that God can change you, and are you willing to work with him?*





✠ DIALOGUE WITH GOD

*Dear God, it is hard for me to put childish ways behind me and yet become childlike. Part of me wants to grow up—and part of me wants to be a kid forever, without weighty responsibilities and momentous decisions at every turn. I know that's nonsense. Perhaps this is a new way—a childlike posture combined with an adult work ethic. Humility and openness coupled with a persevering spirit. A recognition that you must first work in me, and a determination to change the patterns and habits that hinder that work. This is going to be hard. But it's worth it. So change me, I pray.*

✠ FURTHER BIBLE READING

*Romans 12*

