

TCW

TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN

FEBRUARY 17, 2016

THE DANGEROUS
SIDE OF BLESSINGS

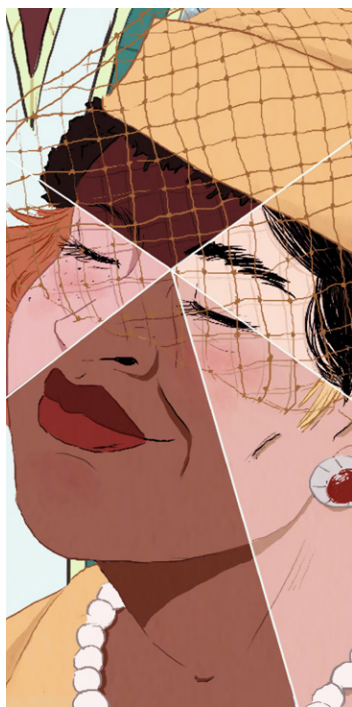
POPE JOHN PAUL II'S
KEY TO LEADERSHIP



Black Women
and the *Imago Dei*

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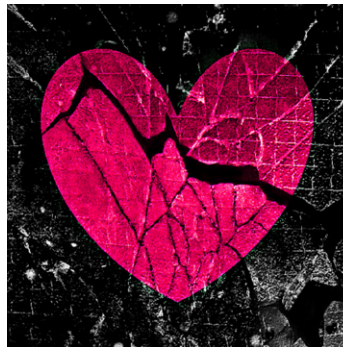
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The Secret to Loving Your Enemies



Kelli B. Trujillo, Editor

It's not merely about willpower or warm feelings.

There are people I cannot bear to love. Rage springs up afresh in me when I think of those who spew racist hatred, or sexually exploit children, or commit acts of terrorist violence. The desire to hate also wells up within me toward people who've committed less extreme but equally infuriating acts against people I love—betrayers, liars, bullies, critics.

I could easily justify that instinctive desire to hate. For I hate evil—and it's just a small step from hating evil to hating the *bearers* of evil.

But this is where Jesus confronts me: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43–44, NIV).

What does this call to love mean in the face of ISIS or the man on the sexual predators list down the street? What does this mean for the person who's betrayed and cheated a loved one or the teen who's bullied your child?

Does this mean drumming up patently false warm feelings or gritting our teeth as we will ourselves to push back hateful reactions? The will certainly plays a part as we assent to Jesus' teaching. But there is a deeper idea that can help us grapple with and grow into this radical call. We find it in Genesis 1:27: "God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

This reality of the *imago dei*—that each of us, friends and enemies alike, are made in God's image—calls us to recognize an innate worth that cannot be erased by any evil action. Here is the truth: That evil-bearer? He or she is also an *image-bearer*. And this has far reaching implications for each of us.

I invited several women I know to share their own thoughts on how Scripture's teaching

on the image of God challenges us to truly love our enemies, and this is what they said:

- **It roots out our prejudices.** “If all people are made in the image of God and yet we see a particular group of people as an enemy or as someone to fear, then we need to ask why. What are we afraid of?” [Sandra Maria Van Opstal](#) observes. This teaching challenges believers to wrestle with how fear may be “causing us to dehumanize other people.”

- **It forces us to face ourselves.** For [Patricia Raybon](#), loving enemies means “seeing them as I am—broken, confused, messed up, hurting, struggling.” For example, she says, “I can pray for the poor lost souls of ISIS because they are, indeed, lost. As I am lost—on my worst days for certain. . . . They need Jesus just as I need Jesus.”

- **It calls us to grapple with the extraordinary gospel.** “To love our enemy is to believe that no one is beyond the grace of God—that every single human being is on the same footing before God as sinners. It is only through Jesus’ death and resurrection that we are able to be reconciled to him,” [Jenny Yang](#) asserts. “We should view our enemies as people not just made in the image of God but also potential instruments God can use for his glory.”

- **It invites us to live out our true calling.** “To love our enemies we must learn to see them as image bearers. . . . But first we must learn to see *ourselves* as image bearers,” [Hannah Anderson](#) says. “When I remember that my core calling is to show what God is like and do what he would do, it fundamentally changes how I respond to my enemies because I remember how God responded to me when I was *his* enemy.”

Understanding—deep, deep down—that we are all made in God’s image has implications not just for how we view and treat enemies, but for so many other aspects of how we view ourselves and relate to others. In our TCW cover story “[Black Women and the Imago Dei](#),” Austin Channing Brown examines how this truth impacts one’s sense of cultural and ethnic identity. And in “[Dear Parents of a Child with Special Needs](#),” Micha Boyett explores how the *imago dei* interweaves through her love for her son who has Down syndrome.

Recognizing the *imago dei* in my enemies doesn’t magically erase negative feelings that arise, but it does forcibly reorient my perspective—away from my feelings and onto the Cross. Thank the Lord that, as Romans 5:10 says, “our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies”!

Terrorist, abuser, adulterer . . . *sinner*. Our indelible, God-given dignity remains. For we each are made in his image—and that will never change.

Grace,



Kelli B. Trujillo

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● Cover Story

Black Women and the *Imago Dei*

We are all—together—the fullest representation of God. | **AUSTIN CHANNING BROWN**

ARTWORK BY ELYSE NICOLE

I was nine years old when I walked into the old brick church the color of cloudy skies. Like a shy duckling, I followed my father into the building and through the hallways. Kind faces greeted us as we walked by, as if we were all old friends. The closer we got to the sanctuary, the brighter the hallway became. Finally, standing before open double doors, sunlight poured around our feet, beaming through tall stained glass windows. Pews anchored in neat rows, solid and strong, were filled with families clapping with the drums. Ushers stood at attention using gloved hand signals to guide us to a seat. My eyes were glued to the front of the church where a choir swayed back and forth to the music emanating from a stout, electric organ. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. As I tried to take it all in, it quickly became apparent that my father had brought us to a black church. It was love at first sight.

I don't know if you've ever had this feeling. It's what happens when there's an overwhelming sense of belonging. Perhaps you've experienced this when visiting a church too. Or maybe your sense of belonging happened in a small group or Bible study, a volunteer opportunity, or shared meal with friends. I imagine for you, like me, this memory comes with strong feelings of nostalgia. We know it couldn't have been as perfect as we remember, and yet the sweetness of the moment is all that matters. Whatever imperfections existed in reality—a choir member singing off-key, someone upset we stole "their seat," or any of a thousand things that could go wrong in a church service—were of no importance to

me then or now. All I remember is feeling at home.

The truth is church was nothing new to me. Having attended a Christian school for as long as I can remember, I had sat through countless chapels and church services. But the two experiences were difficult to compare. When I walked into that church, for the very first time, I was surrounded by people who looked like me. It's hard to express how much this moment changed everything.

LOSING MY SELF

In the late '80s and early '90s when I grew up attending a predominantly white private school, words like *diversity* and *multiculturalism* had not yet been popularized. So schools were still developing curriculum and experiences largely devoid of cultural depth. In my experience, all of my teachers were white, as were the principal, librarian, and other staff members. We regularly used illustrated Bibles, storybooks, and movies in which all the characters were also white. When teachers posted pictures of Jesus in the room, Jesus was always depicted as white. Our chapel services always had a white speaker who used cultural references with which I was familiar only because of my white peers, not because the references actually applied to my home or family life.

Much of my school experience was devoid of representations that showed I mattered—in the curriculum, in the images, in the leadership. It was assumed that whiteness was universal and that nothing was lost by not representing bodies like mine. While I never doubted that the adults in my life cared for me, it seemed to me that they believed white bodies were somehow more representative of the Divine than mine ever could be. And though I couldn't have articulated it at the time, it left me feeling devalued as a whole person made in the image of God.

And so began for me what Howard Thurman refers to as “imitation” in *Jesus and the Disinherited*:

The aim of such an attitude is to assimilate the culture and the social behavior-pattern of the dominant group. It is the profound capitulation to the powerful, because it means the yielding of oneself to that which, deep within, one recognizes as being unworthy. It makes for a strategic loss of self-respect.

If you've ever been in a place where you felt a profound sense of not belonging, you likely understand this definition all too well. In these moments of imitation, we find ourselves slowly casting off who we truly are in an effort to blend in, to be accepted, to belong. The same was true of me, even as a child. Did I need to assimilate—to lose or diminish who I was as a black female—in order to be part of the faith culture I lived within? How could I understand what it meant to be made in the image of God when I felt so disconnected and unseen?

At that time, there was nothing in my life to bridge what it meant to be a black woman and what it meant to be a Christian. I began to believe that Jesus didn't just need to redeem

my humanity but that somehow my very identity as a black female was broken too.

SEEING MY SELF

Have you ever participated in conversations about race at church and had someone use Galatians 3:28 as reasoning for **ignoring racial differences**? This verse reads, "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus." It's often interpreted as proof that racial differences can and should be minimized in order to live into the truth that we are "one in Christ Jesus." However, when this lens is used, the result often means minimizing the representation of other cultures and instead relying on the predominate culture. Doing so minimizes not only the importance of the identities of members but also the inherent diversity of the *imago dei*, which Miroslav Volf speaks of in *Exclusion and Embrace*: "Baptism into Christ creates a people as the differentiated body of Christ. Bodily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed."

When I stepped into that black church as a nine-year-old girl, my "inscribed difference" that I'd been working so hard to minimize finally moved from being theoretically important to God to becoming intrinsic to my understanding of being a member of the body of Christ and a bearer of the *imago dei*. As I worshiped with other believers that day, I received an amazing gift: I began to see in a deep and profound way that I, as a black girl, was indeed made in God's image.

This church that amazed me became our church home. Though I recognize not all black churches are the same, there are four ways this particular church gave this gift to me.

1. Black women were revered. In our church there are elderly women known collectively as the "church mothers." They often sat in the front row, purses filled with peppermint candies, hats sitting high while lap scarves hung low. To be considered a church mother conferred importance and respect. We took great pride in enjoying their wisdom, humor, and love.

2. Black women led. Seeing women lead in every area of the church gave me joy. Black women created Bible studies and youth ministries. They orchestrated the choir and the usher board. They nursed members through emotional church services and personal losses. Every Sunday I saw the great giftedness and excellence of black women in leadership.

3. Black women preached. Passionate voices radiated through the microphones as black women molded sermons around our lives, forming cradles of words to carry us through the week. These women preached with boldness and clarity, moving us from the margins of society to the center of God's care and love.

4. I could see myself. Black culture was infused into every aspect of the service. The preacher talked the same way my parents did at home. The songs the choir sang were the same songs we played in the car to and from school. The references in sermons and Bible studies, programs and speeches, were filled with black history and contemporary culture. This church gave meaning and credibility to the ways I understood the world. My school had always taught me that God could see me, but the black church taught me that God also *understood* me as a black woman.

AN ENDURING GIFT

The black church (or any other church) is not all perfection, of course. The church I attended as a child was filled with people—and therefore it was filled with brokenness. But I'm okay holding all of its brokenness in tension with the gift it gave me. This church fought against the disregard and minimization of my body I experienced in other settings. It countered the overwhelming number of images that depicted exclusively white people as beautiful, smart, excelling humans who solely represented God and were represented by God. Never focusing on hate, the church was all about loving its members, from the infant to the elderly. We processed our experience of the world together, trying to make sense of our daily lives and the promises of God. Never shying away from issues of suffering among us, we always walked away with hope.

This particular church certainly taught me how to love others, inside and outside the body of Christ, but it also taught me that I am fearfully and wonderfully made ([Psalm 139:14](#)). My black femaleness is not a mistake, not a scourge. My black femaleness is not an accident or immaterial. My black femaleness is but one representation of God, for I am a bearer of God's image.

I haven't attended a black church in a number of years, and I really miss it. But I carry with me, into every church I've attended since, this gift of truly believing I am created in the image of God. And this is a gift that keeps giving because it has helped me realize how special—how gifted—other ethnicities, languages, and cultures are to the church. I delight in learning from the global family of God just how rich the Creator's diversity is. This diversity doesn't require us to melt away, but it instead invites our full participation just as God made us.

We are all—together—the fullest representation of God when we allow our ethnic, lingual, and cultural differences to be celebrated. We can learn about the Creator and ourselves when we don't just profess that we are all created in the image of God but when we begin to reflect this belief onto one another. ●

Austin Channing Brown is a TCW regular contributor and [columnist](#). A resident director and multicultural liaison at Calvin College, Austin is passionate about racial reconciliation—and has a slight obsession with books. When she's not reading, you'll find Austin watching HGTV or updating her blog [AustinChanning.com](#).



Dear Parents of a Child with Special Needs

Here's what I want you to know. | MICHA BOYETT

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ear new parents of a child with special needs,

I saw your birth announcement. Congratulations! The way I see it, you had two deliveries yesterday. One was bringing your baby into this world. The other was publically sharing about your baby's extra needs. Both required deep courage. You delivered graciously and with joy.

I've been thinking of you all night. I got up to nurse my baby at 3:40 A.M., and I can't go back to sleep without writing you. I've been a parent for a total of seven years, but my experience in this new world of special needs is small. I've been doing this for almost eight months, and I'm still struggling to understand my own feelings about my baby's diagnosis. But I have learned a few secrets—the kind you write each other about at four in the morning. (You're parents of a newborn. You're up anyway, right?)

Here's what I want you to know:

YOU'RE GOING TO WEEP

When my child was born, I wept. Some of my tears came from a place of love, and some from a place of fear. And I've learned I don't have to categorize those tears. Parenting my child with special needs will mirror the human experience. It will be wonderful, and it will be painful.

I've learned to think of my grief and my deep love for my baby as a braid woven through

my chest, pulled tight. I don't have to know where the love ends and the sorrow begins, only that they wrap around one another. Sometimes it's hard to distinguish my anxiety from my joy, my love for my child from dreams that have been lost.

I simply know this: The love I felt when I first saw my baby is not diminished by my sorrow. Love is never diminished by pain. They have always lived equally together as long as parents and babies have lived on this earth.

If you need permission to cry, here it is. You get to cry because your baby is beautiful and particularly yours. You get to cry because this diagnosis is hard and no parents ever want their child to suffer. And you get to cry because your baby cried all night and you're tired. Which brings me to my next point.

PEOPLE MEAN WELL

Just because your baby has unique challenges doesn't make you a saint. I refuse to count the number of people who have told me they admire me for being Ace's mom. It's nice of them to say that. But saying that I'm special sounds a little like this: "You are amazing for loving your child! I just couldn't do it!"

I assure you that hurts. But no one who says this means to hurt me. There are people who think my husband and I are special for loving and raising our baby. That's because our child's diagnosis is frightening. And it's also because loving Ace is changing us in beautiful ways.

Most people simply don't know what to say. So when their words are painful or trite I've learned to tell myself that they're doing their best. What they want to say is, "This thing you're doing is hard." If I let their fumbblings come to me coated in grace, I will hear their kindness. The compassion is in their eyes if I'm willing to see it.

BLESSING DOESN'T MEAN WHAT YOU THINK

Often people will call my baby a "blessing." And most of the time when they use that word they mean something close to rainbows and unicorns. They mean my baby is an angel who will always bring happiness.

Sometimes it's hard to hear that (despite my baby's cherub-like cuteness) because Ace is just as human as any other child. He may be sweet, but one day he'll whine about dessert and picking up his room, just like his brothers.

So I've been teaching myself what blessing really is. You know the [story of Jacob and God](#) struggling all night in that mystical wrestling match: "I will not let go until you bless me!"? I'm making that my parenting mantra. This journey will be hard, for us and for our children. Blessing is hard won. Jacob wrestled all night and demanded a blessing. You know what he got? A lifelong limp and a new name. Also? Legacy. He was the father of a great nation.

Blessing is not for the faint in heart. It's always accompanied by suffering. I'm learning to embrace the struggle. I won't let go until God blesses me.

And when acquaintances say *blessing* without acknowledging *wrestling*, I don't have to be angry. I just reinterpret their words for myself. I want to learn to hear the truth in every easy

phrase dished out for shallow comfort and find gratitude there.

EVERY PARENT SUFFERS

Most babies don't struggle to breastfeed because of low muscle tone or illness. Most people don't have to send their newborn into heart surgery. I'm sorry your first days of parenting are extra hard. But here's the truth: Every parent suffers deeply, whether you suffer at the beginning or later. Whether your suffering is over the rebellion of your child or your own daily parenting failure, being a parent is always hard. It is always beautiful and miraculous and heartbreaking. Your heart is breaking a little earlier than most.

I think that's what people mean when they say you're special or that your child is a blessing. They mean that you're learning the secret of suffering earlier; you are becoming wise.

In that braid of love and sorrow the third strand is wisdom. It's there already, woven so tight you may not recognize it yet. You don't have to. Right now you just get to receive. Receiving sounds passive, but it's not. It's the work of labor, of delivery. It's the work of bringing a child into this beautiful and dangerous world, cleaning her body and holding her tight.

YOUR CHILD BEARS THE IMAGE OF GOD

What makes a human being valuable? The world tells us that the most important people are the smartest, the most beautiful, the most successful. You will hear other parents brag on the playground about their child's physical prowess or intellectual superiority. They're simply buying into the story we all tell ourselves when we're afraid: that the more impressive we are, the more worth we have.

This is your moment to undo that lie in your own heart. You are not your performance. Your baby is not more or less valuable because of what he or she can or can't do. Your and your child's value is found in a more secure, powerful place, in the core of your humanity.

We are all made in **God's image**. So though your child may struggle to walk or eat, though your child may not be able to connect relationally or learn to read, though your baby may meet milestones more slowly, your child is **fearfully and wonderfully made**. Your child is enough because our Creator has made your child enough.

Our value is found in our belovedness. Whether we can walk or speak or impress any other human on this earth, we are deeply and unconditionally loved by our Maker.

The image of God is a beautiful and dangerous thing. And so is your child's life. It was given to your care by the God of creation. You are highly favored, friend.

Do you remember that Mister Rogers song, "**It's You I Like**"? It says, "It's you I like, every part of you." Sometimes I sing that song for Ace while I'm changing his diaper or we're playing on the floor. I sing it when I remember the panic that rose up in my throat in those prenatal diagnosis days, and in the hospital after his birth, when I'd let myself imagine what his diagnosis would ask of us. Sometimes that panic still shows up. But, almost eight months in, I need you to know this: I like him, I like him, I like him, exactly as he is.

I receive my child. I won't let go until you bless me. Pray these things. And hold tight, dear ones. This is a wonderful, dangerous season of wrestling. Don't let go until you're limping. Until your name is changed. Until you're blessed.

With love,
Micha

Micha Boyett is a blogger, wife, mom, and the author of *Found: A Story of Questions, Grace & Everyday Prayer*. A former youth minister, she's passionate about monasticism and ancient Christian spiritual practices and how they inform the contemporary life of faith. Micha and her husband live in San Francisco with their three boys. A version of this article first appeared on MichaBoyett.com.



How to Effectively Witness

6 principles for personal evangelism | **ARIANNE BENEDETTO**

For a long time, I've had an uneasy understanding of what it means to share the gospel. Being concerned only with the message—that is, being quick to mention Jesus and to point out sin when I saw it—left me feeling like a clumsy, jerky clod. On the other hand, focusing solely on avoiding awkwardness by sidestepping controversial topics such as God and sin made me feel like a coward, more concerned about my own comfort than the eternal well-being of others.

The balance point of effective, genuine witnessing eluded me. How do you speak honestly without alienating the listener? How can you be relatable and sensitive without sacrificing the truth—which often offends?

While struggling to reach this balance, I've found the Book of Acts to be eye opening. Here, the saving message Jesus first trusted to an intimate group began to spread, as per his instructions: "You will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). One fine example of this is Paul's ministry in Athens ([Acts 17:16-32](#)).

Paul did not go to Athens based on his own plans or timing. Opponents of the gospel were chasing him and his fellow evangelists from city to city, agitating crowds and inciting animosity as they preached. Fellow believers brought Paul to Athens so that Silas and Timothy could join him.

In the meantime, he was troubled to find the Athenians steeped in idolatry and eager to entertain any spiritual ideas that piqued their interest. Paul reasoned with residents there and was eventually invited to speak to a group of people meeting at the Areopagus, the place where new ideas were vetted.

Paul's methods there are somewhat surprising but also instructional on how to share the gospel effectively in our own culture. Here are some of the most helpful principles to be gained from his teaching.

1. RESPECT YOUR AUDIENCE

Learn about your listeners, and show them sensitivity and respect. As Paul started speaking to the crowd, he acknowledged their own value system: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way, for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines" (17:22–23).

Wait, he saw that they were "very religious"? He saw their "many shrines"? Just a few verses earlier, we find that Paul was "deeply troubled" by their pagan lifestyle (17:16). It's almost surprising that Paul didn't start with a truth-in-love style denouncement of their idolatry.

But Paul understood that such an approach would only shut down any hearing he had gained with them. Paul wasn't shying away from addressing sin; he simply knew that there was an effective and an ineffective way to do this. He opted to show respect for his listeners and sensitivity toward what was important to them.

2. BEGIN WITH THE FAMILIAR

Start with what they do know rather than what they don't. At this point, the Athenians had no basis for recognizing their worship as sinful. But they did understand what it means to be zealous for spiritual things, and it was to this religious zeal Paul first appealed.

The very existence of an altar "To an Unknown God" (17:23) showed that the Athenians were open to the likelihood of there being more out there than what they knew, and Paul used this opportunity to tell them about a God—the God—whom they'd not yet known. He provided them with a starting point from their own culture for understanding what was otherwise unknown to them.

3. PRESENT A CORRECT PICTURE OF GOD

Speak accurately and winsomely about God. At the root, the Athenians' idolatry stemmed from an inaccurate—even reversed—understanding of God and his nature.

They were perhaps willing to add Paul's strange, new god to their collection, yet Paul promoted a God who requires exclusivity (see [Exodus 20:1–6](#)). They served gods created by their own hands, but Paul spoke of the one true God who "made the world and everything in it" (Acts 17:24). Their religious system could not exist without the work they'd done, but the living God does not rely on human hands because "he himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need," and "he decided beforehand when they should rise

and fall, and he determined their boundaries” (17:25, 26).

God is more powerful, majestic, and sovereign than the Athenians could imagine—yet also closer and more intimate. This all-powerful God has done all of this so that people might “perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us” (17:27). This is far beyond the scope of relationship one could have with a mere idol.

4. FIND COMMON GROUND

Seeing the truth—and speaking to those who don’t yet see it—can estrange two parties. But Paul did not take the condescending posture of one who is superior to his listeners.

Rather than highlighting the disparities in their beliefs, Paul used an understanding of their culture to help them find common ground—in this case, by quoting poets’ lines about the Creator: “For in him we live and move and exist,” and “We are his offspring” (17: 28). The classic poets would have been widely known and revered by the Athenians. Interestingly enough, the second of these lines is taken from the poet Cleanthes’ “Hymn to Zeus,” an unlikely source for Paul to use in familiarizing them with the true nature of God. Like Paul, we may be able to find common ground and build connection even in surprising ways.

5. GENTLY CORRECT ERROR

Be prepared to disarmingly but truthfully point out the fallacy of sin, along with the need for repentance. Paul drew the logical conclusion from what had been established: Of course God is not an idol, and to worship this way is misguided—and perilous. He kept this line of reasoning blessedly free of emotionally charged words of condemnation, but he was clear, accurate, and urgent in his message.

Paul achieved this in part by making the summons to correct understanding and worship of God corporate rather than personal: “We shouldn’t think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone” (17:29, emphasis added). Further, Paul made clear that God used to excuse this kind of thinking, but things have changed and he now calls all to amend their erroneous ways.

Paul stressed that changing course was necessary. Where the path to restoration with God had once been closed, a way has been made ([John 3:16](#)), and it has been opened to all people ([Romans 10:12-13](#))—but the time is limited. Paul’s message culminated with the truth that this way is through Jesus, as proven by his resurrection—which, unsurprisingly, drew a mixed reaction from the crowd.

6. BE READY IN ALL SITUATIONS

Paul was in Athens in a period of waiting, and, given the circumstances that brought him there, possibly also a place of frustration or disappointment. But he made wise use of every chance to share the gospel. He didn’t wait until he was back in his comfort zone or when the opportunity to witness was the kind he hoped for.

Paul engaged people in the synagogue, in the market place, and in the meeting at the Areopagus. He spoke to those who already feared God but didn’t yet know Jesus, to

Epicurean and Stoic philosophers without any acquaintance with Yahweh, and to Athenian citizens and foreigners alike. Notice that Paul spoke to those who *wanted* to engage, and he knew when it was time to leave. He spoke the truth, but he also took pains to provide them with every opportunity to understand and *receive* that truth.

These days I interact differently with those whom I hope to share my faith. I make more intentional efforts to not just know but also understand their worldviews, and I notice aspects of the gospel that they may already identify with. I wait for the Spirit to reveal more logical, organic opportunities to discuss weighty issues, such as the existence of God, rather than taking the first awkward one that pops up. I'm not a witnessing superstar, but I'm now confident that being true to the message and sensitive to the listener are not mutually exclusive goals.

In the end, some responded favorably to Paul's message, asking to hear more and even accepting the gospel truth. Others rejected it. We all want to witness effectively, and we should make every effort to do so. Yet no matter what we do, there will always be some who scoff and turn away. If we keep our hearts both soft and true, we will help others receive the truth rather than contributing to their rejection of it. ●

Arienne Benedetto lives in Portland, Oregon, with her husband, Anthony, and four children. She is passionate about learning and meditating on Scripture to guide how we think about and act upon our faith



When Believers Break Up

3 truths to hold on to | **RACHEL MUELLER**

It was pitch black but for the faint light of glow-in-the-dark stickers above my bed.

Why am I in Jon's bed?

I shouldn't have been at my parents' house in my youngest brother's empty bed. My head felt fuzzy and my mouth dry. I groaned as the memory of the previous night came crashing in like a tidal wave. My body ached.

So this is what a broken heart feels like, I thought. No wonder people die from this.

I had taken on the role of *girlfriend* for the first time five months earlier; now I woke to a new identity. I had become *ex-girlfriend*.

That night was the darkest of my life thus far. Had I realized what I was fading into, I probably wouldn't have gotten out of bed that next day. Or the next. I found myself living in a new reality, and I had no idea what to do, how to move forward. The old version of myself had been replaced with a new version, and I didn't know how to go back.

POINTING BACK TO JESUS

At some level, I realized that people had been living with heartbreaks, breakups, and rejection since the beginning of time. But *I* hadn't. I felt lost and afraid. People offered good wishes and advice, but they couldn't penetrate the shell of numbness surrounding my shattered heart. I started to look for anything that would make sense of my new world, and what I found was shockingly sparse.

Sure, the Internet was full of articles and books on how to get back at him or how to

mend a broken heart, and top-ten lists of coping mechanisms. But I couldn't find anything that pointed me back to Jesus. I couldn't find anything that helped me as a Christian woman wrestle through my sense of forgiveness and anger and betrayal and loss of hope in a dating relationship.

Over time and with the help of a counselor and friends, I discovered a few lessons from my heartbreak.

1. DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR DOESN'T HEAL WOUNDS

When the dust settled, I found myself straddling the line between the ways I was told I'm allowed to cope and the ways I should walk in obedience to God. It was an exhausting, heart-wrenching journey, and I didn't always do it well.

Excessive amounts of ice cream, talking badly about my ex, and keying his car would provide instant gratification; they would numb my pain, validate my feelings, and allow me to hurt him in some way. However, I learned that any coping behavior that wasn't fully surrendered to the Lord only led me further into captivity to my brokenness. I felt a little bit like the Israelites; they were told the Promised Land was waiting for them, yet they kept whining about how much they missed Egypt.

When we choose destructive behaviors, we resist God's effort to move us into Canaan. We tell God we didn't believe he had something good in store for us; we tell him that we know better—that we've decided to put ourselves on the throne and worship a god who looks suspiciously similar to us.

I had to take intentional steps to counterculturally choose forgiveness, gentleness, and kindness toward my ex. I had to be aware of the thoughts in my heart so that they didn't inevitably lead to words from my mouth—because healing doesn't come from doing destructive behaviors.

2. YOUR FEELINGS ARE VALID

Breaking up is awful, and it hurts. One day that person is in your life and everything is normal . . . and the next he doesn't exist. It feels like death but worse, somehow, because you know he's still out there somewhere. And if you're like me, you assume he is doing fine and moving on and that you're suffering alone—which makes you feel even worse.

But you also lose hope. You lose the plans for what could have been, a life you were building, the feelings that it might finally be your turn. That loss of hope might be the toughest thing you have to work through.

All of this weighs down your heart, like a cloak you cannot remove. I'm sorry for your pain. I'm sorry your heart is broken. I'm sorry many people will say the wrong thing and make it hurt more. I'm sorry you'll bump into memories of him at unexpected times and waves of heartbreak will crash into you again. I'm sorry that it feels hopeless. I understand. I feel your pain. I see you. Your feelings are valid.

Yet my prayer is that you won't allow yourself to stay in those feelings forever. Give yourself time and space, but don't allow your emotions to hold you captive in the land of

the ex-girlfriend. You are in the desert now, but that means you're moving toward Canaan.

3. THE GRIEF WILL END

For many months I was convinced I would never not feel pain. Everywhere I went memories of him or us would crowd into my vision, and I couldn't see anything but the instant replay of our moments together. It was awful.

I had never gone through a breakup before, let alone been dumped, so when people told me time heals all wounds I wanted to shake my fist and yell mean words. *My* pain was different. *My* love was special. *My* broken heart could never be healed. Nothing in my life made me believe I would get over this devastation, so I put a wall around my heart and accepted my new reality of sadness.

Of course the pain did fade, slowly but surely. I went from crying myself to sleep every night to crying a few times a week to crying only occasionally to not crying at all. Along the way, I learned to sort out which emotions stemmed from the loss of my ex and which came from the loss of what I hoped for, and then grieved appropriately. I began to think objectively about who he is, who I am, who we were together, and if we actually were better together for the kingdom than we are apart.

And I can honestly say I don't miss him anymore.

FINDING HEALING

In the time that has passed since that dark night of the soul, I've experienced more breakups, and I've had to remind myself that time really will heal this pain. I eat a little ice cream and give myself space to feel all the emotions—but I don't lose hope.

You lose a lot when you end a relationship, but you gain so much by choosing forgiveness, gentleness, and kindness. I can tell you that I found extraordinary love from a Father who desired to give it to me. I found a strength inside myself I didn't know existed. I found compassion and love and vulnerability. I found hope.

And I would relive all these experiences again if it meant I would get to know Jesus the way I know him today. ●

Rachel Mueller is a 20something who blogs about life, love, her misadventures in dating, and how to find Jesus in the middle of it. She can be found at RachelMueller.net or tweeting at [@rachelmuellder](https://twitter.com/rachelmuellder).



When God Gives You More than You Deserve

The dangerous side of blessings



Joy Beth Smith is TCW's assistant editor. Follow her on Twitter at [@JBsTwoCents](#), on Instagram at [@jbstwocents](#), or on [JoyBethSmith.com](#).

Can you imagine what Joshua was thinking the day he led the children of Israel into the Promised Land? For **40 years** they had been wandering, and for 40 years they experienced the freedom from Egypt only to be held captive by their own lack of faith.

They were led solely by the sovereignty and providence of God—a **pillar of cloud** by day and a pillar of fire by night. They ate **only manna** and **meat**, and even then they had to gather it fresh every single day: “Some gathered a lot, some only a little. But when they measured it out, everyone had just enough. Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough. Each family had just what it needed” (Exodus 16:17–18).

For many years, this is how I viewed my walk with the Lord. He has always been good to me, always proving himself sovereign. There was always a pillar to follow, whether that came in a divinely timed devotion or the wise words of a mentor. And the manna was there every morning without fail, sustaining me for all I would need that day—but never was there excess.

It felt like the Lord and I were getting by with little to spare. We were eking through this life, him providing, me gathering, but it always felt tiresome and heavy. Life was often exhausting.

HOMESICK FOR THE WILDERNESS

But sometimes God surprises you, and the walls of Jericho fall, and the pillars lead to the Promised Land, and then what do you do? How do you adjust to a land flowing with milk and honey when you're used to quail and manna?

In the last year, these are the questions I've been asking as opportunities and blessings pour into my life. Relationships are rich and deep. My job is satisfying. My needs and wants are met in abundance. I'm blessed with books to read (and write!), babies to hold, and mountains to climb—literally.

But instead of absorbing all of this and basking in all the Lord has done, I can feel myself growing skeptical. The honey sticks to the roof of my mouth, and the milk seems too thick to swallow. What happens when the blessings no longer come? What happens if I wandered around for 40 years only to briefly pass through the Promised Land? What if this time is a respite from the wandering and not a final destination?

Then God is still good. That's what I have learned. If God is good in the wandering, he's good in the blessing. And if he's good in giving the blessings, he's good in taking them away as well.

"I came naked from my mother's womb,
and I will be naked when I leave.
The LORD gave me what I had,
and the LORD has taken it away.
Praise the name of the LORD!" (Job 1:21)

It's all his anyway. Every bit of manna and every book proposal and every ounce of love and ambition in our bones—they're all his. And it's refreshing to remember that we are not responsible for getting ourselves to the Promised Land or keeping ourselves there; we're only responsible for doing much with what we've been given, manna and milk alike.

We can often feel like the servant with only one talent from the Matthew 25 parable. Some years we bury that single talent, too scared to lose it. And some years we trade it for a new pair of shoes instead of multiplying it as we should. But now, when the time comes and we're the servants standing there, hands overflowing with talents, we might feel more scared than when we had just one—because to whom much has been given, much more will be required (Luke 12:48).

And this is the dangerous side, the terrifying side, of blessing. To have much is to be expected to give much, to love much, to do much. Squandering is no longer an option. So now comes the task we've had all along: Serve God with everything we have, whether that's much or it's little. And when our much becomes little or our little becomes much, realize none of it was really ours to begin with.

In our seasons of wilderness wandering and parading into the Promised Land, may the Lord continue to remind us of his sovereignty in all things, his goodness every day, and his glory that knows no end. ●



● Excerpt

What Every Leader Can Learn from Pope John Paul I

The first step to extraordinary leadership | JENNI CATRON

It was August 1978 and the crowds were thick in St. Peter's Square, expectant and hopeful for the inauguration of their new pope, John Paul I. But in a startling turn of events, the same crowds found their way back to St. Peter's a mere six weeks later due to the sudden death of their newly appointed pope.

Amidst confusion, mourning, and skepticism, Pope John Paul II accepted the papal responsibility. To make matters worse for the locals, he was the first non-Italian pope since the Dutchman, Adrian VI, who was elected in 1522. Pope John Paul II's appointment wasn't expected. He wasn't anticipated. If anything, the church was skeptical, and the world was watching.

But Pope John Paul II did something unprecedented for the papacy: He addressed the crowd directly. He smiled. He spoke the crowd's native tongue of Italian, one of twelve languages in which he was fluent. He acknowledged the potential mistakes he might make with the spectators' language and invited them to correct him when he did. Eric Metaxas, author of *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness*, describes the scene: "His openness, vulnerability, and humor drew laughter and applause from the crowd. By the time the extemporaneous speech drew to a close, a remarkable thing had happened: the crowd that was surprised and confused before was now wholehearted on John Paul II's side."

When John Paul II stepped up that day to assume his new responsibility of leadership, he became real. He became relatable. He displayed how an extraordinary leader comprehends and employs the relational dimension of leadership. He led from his heart.

Metaxas explains, “Part of the greatness of this man was his extraordinary ability to communicate humbly and humorously and clearly. There can be no other word for it: He was charming. Like a great politician but without a hint of guile, he managed to connect with his audiences in a way that delighted them.”

Leading from the heart means understanding the power of connection: knowing that one of our greatest human needs is to be known. John Ortberg expresses it [this way](#): “The yearning to attach and connect, to love and be loved, is the fiercest longing of the soul.” We want to believe that we matter. And we sincerely long for those who lead us to see us as individuals—to see our unique potential and contribution, to help call that out in us, and to affirm that what we bring and who we are really matter to the greater story.

When we lead from the heart, we earn influence with others through relationship rather than authority. Relational leaders realize that title and position only get you so far, but the places you can take a team with relational influence are endless. Relational leaders understand that people follow leaders not for the leader but for themselves.

People follow leaders who inspire them to believe greater things about themselves. In his immensely popular TED Talk titled [“How Great Leaders Inspire Action,”](#) Simon Sinek says, “People don’t buy what you do. They buy why you do it.” He continues, “What you do simply proves what you believe.” If what you do communicates what you believe, what are your actions saying about what you believe about those you lead? When we relationally connect with those we lead, we communicate value and worth.

The heart of leadership is the start of leadership. When we connect with the heart, we earn influence to lead with soul, mind, and strength. Consider your relational leadership influence: How are you connecting with those you lead? Do they know you’re for them and that you value them? Do they know how their work affects the entire team? Do you know their stories and what inspires them and motivates them? Every relational connection you make gives you greater opportunity to lead. ●

Jenni Catron is part of the central leadership team at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California. She’s the author of *The 4 Dimensions of Extraordinary Leadership* and *Clout: Discover and Unleash Your God-Given Influence*, and she blogs at [JenniCatron.com](#). This article was taken from *The 4 Dimensions of Extraordinary Leadership*. Copyright © 2015 by Jenni Catron. Used by permission of Thomas Nelson.

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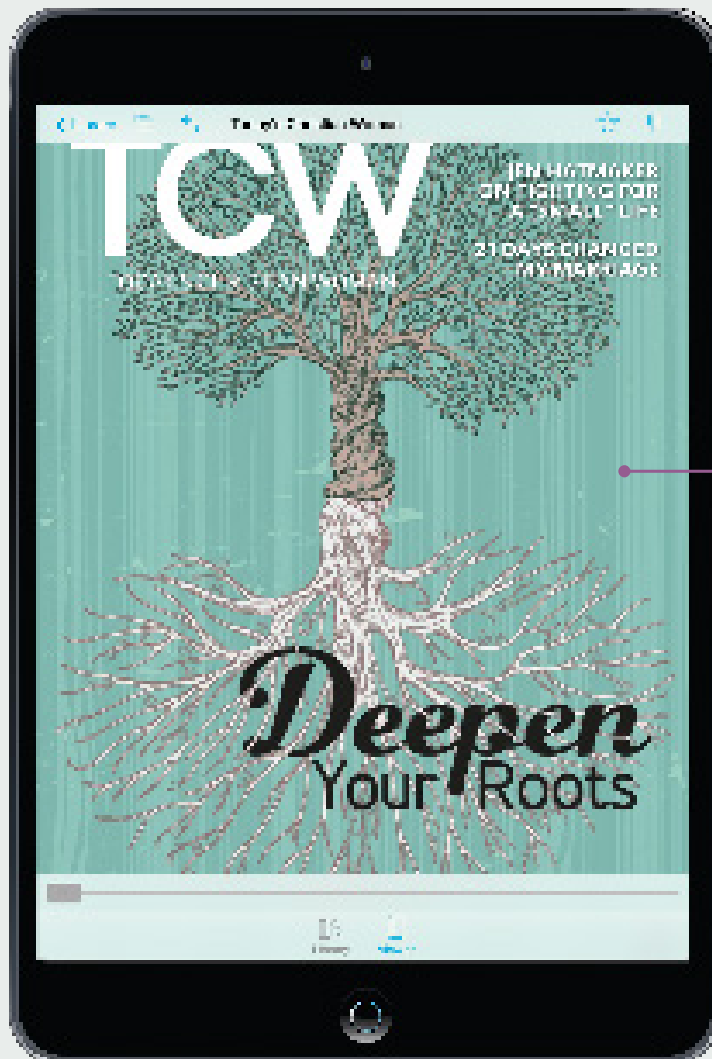
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