

# Striving for Something We Already Have

Grace slips through our fingers like water, not because it's elusive, but because we keep clenching our fists. There's something almost maddening about the concept of grace—how it defies every instinct we have about earning our place in this world. We live in a universe of transactions, of cause and effect, of merit and reward. So when we encounter love that asks for nothing in return, acceptance that comes without prerequisites, forgiveness that arrives before we even ask for it, our minds revolt. *This cannot be! There must be a catch.* And so we bargain for things we already possess.

We spend our days climbing mountains, thinking God waits at the summit with a checklist and a stopwatch. We catalog our good deeds like currency, counting up our prayers like coins in a jar, convinced that somewhere there's a cosmic ledger where our efforts will finally tip the scales toward worthiness. All the while, He stands in the valley below, arms open, calling us home.

"There is always room for one more," echoes through the chambers of our striving hearts. One more son. One more daughter. One more opportunity to simply receive what has already been given. But we've forgotten how to have open hands. We've trained ourselves to grasp, to work, to prove.

We know grace like the back of our hand—that familiar territory we've mapped with our minds—and yet we cannot seem to turn that hand palm-up in surrender.

The truth is devastating in its simplicity: the work has already been done. Every prayer we think we need to earn, every moment of acceptance we believe we must achieve, every drop of love we imagine we must prove ourselves worthy of—it's

already ours. Not because we're perfect, but because we're His.

We don't need perfection. We need direction. Not toward some distant goal of worthiness, but toward the radical act of receiving. There's something achingly familiar in the way we catalog our spiritual efforts, isn't there? Like that haunting refrain that asks if we've got soul—we keep taking inventory of all the things we've done, as if the ledger itself might save us. But grace doesn't keep score.

Still, we climb. We strive uphill, bloodied knees and calloused hands, trying to improve our spiritual résumé while Love itself waits in the mess of our valley. In our woundedness. In our spiritual chaos. The invitation isn't to clean ourselves up first—it's to come as we are, broken and beautiful and bewildered by grace.

"Come home," He whispers, while we shout up the mountain asking to be accepted.

"Help me," we cry, not realizing we're already held.

"Redeem me," we plead, blind to the fact that redemption happened long before we knew we needed it.

What He wants isn't our perfection—it's our passion. Not our achievements, but our attention. Not our worthiness, but our willingness to be loved without earning it. He's waiting for that moment when we finally exhale the words that change everything: *"Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit."*

Broken, bloodied, and feeling utterly useless as we may be, this is the movement from chaos to serene—not through our striving, but through our surrender. Not by climbing higher, but by coming home.

Grace remains maddening because it asks us to accept what we cannot earn, receive what we did not work for, and trust in

love that makes no sense by the world's standards.

**Perhaps that's exactly the point.**

In a world obsessed with merit and achievement, grace stands as a quiet revolution—a love that simply is, without condition or clause, waiting for us to stop climbing long enough to be embraced.

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## What We Say to God When We Aren't Listening

You know that moment when you're the first one awake on a Saturday morning? Your phone isn't buzzing every thirty seconds, and even the neighbors haven't started their leaf blowers yet. You step outside with your coffee and suddenly realize: *Holy cow, it's actually quiet.* Even your phone is still asleep. No Amazon delivery trucks rumbling by. Just birds doing their thing and wind in the trees – the same sounds people heard thousands of years ago before Spotify.

It hits me that this might be the only five minutes all day when I could actually hear God if He wanted to say something. Which makes me wonder: maybe the reason we struggle to hear from God isn't because He's not talking, but because we've gotten really good at noise.

One of my favorite writers, Bob Benson was asked in a radio interview, (long before podcasts were invented) "What are you trying to say? What's the big message?" He had a seven word reply: **God has something to say to you.** The problem is that He most often speaks softly.

The story of young Samuel getting called by God in the middle of the night got me thinking about how we approach prayer today. Here are four ways we might be making it harder than it needs to be.

## **1. “God, I’ll do the talking. You just nod along.”**

Samuel almost missed God’s voice entirely because he wasn’t expecting it. Sound familiar? We’ve turned prayer into this weird one-sided conversation where we dump our grocery list of requests on God and then say “Amen” like we’re hanging up the phone.

But what if God actually has opinions? What if He’s been trying to get a word in edgewise while we’re busy explaining our five-year plan? The Bible shows prayer as this back-and-forth thing – less like leaving a voicemail, more like texting with a friend who actually texts back.

## **2. “Here’s my wishlist, God. Thanks in advance.”**

We’ve got real stuff going on – bills, relationships, health scares, that acrimonious supervisor. But sometimes I wonder if I’m so focused on getting God to sign off on my agenda that I never stop to ask what His might be.

What if God’s more interested in changing me than he is changing my circumstances? What if He’s got plans that are bigger than my immediate comfort zone? Wild thought, I know. But I have to realize that God isn’t focused on how to make me comfortable. It’s quite the opposite! As C.S. Lewis taught us: *“I’m not sure God wants us to be happy. I think he wants us to love, and be loved. But we are like children, thinking our toys will make us happy and the whole world is our nursery.*

*Something must drive us out of that nursery and into the lives of others, and that something is suffering."*

### **3. "God, please bless this thing I've already decided to do."**

This one's sneaky. We make our plans, get emotionally invested, and then ask God to rubber-stamp them. "Dear God, I really want this opportunity/relationship/thing. Please make it work out!" Maybe the better question isn't "Will you bless this?" but "What do you think I should do?" and then actually waiting for an answer.

### **4. "God, I've got seven minutes before my next Zoom call."**

We've gotten pretty good at compartmentalizing everything, including God. Twenty minutes of quiet time in the morning, check the spiritual box, now back to *real life*. It would be a shame for us to get to the end of our lives realizing that prayer and contemplation were actually the "real life" we were created for.

## **Maybe Try This Instead**

Remember what Eli told Samuel? "Next time you hear that voice, just say: 'Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening.'" Not exactly rocket science, but harder than it sounds.

What if we started our prayer time with our mouths closed and our mental chatter on pause? What if we actually waited to see what God might want to talk about before launching into our presentation?

Try starting with something like:

*“God, I’ve got seventeen things I want to talk to you about, but first – What do You want to say to me?”*

*“Lord, my brain is ping-ponging between my to-do list and that weird thing my boss said yesterday. Help me settle down here so I can actually focus. (Takes a breath) Okay, I’m listening.”*

*“God, I’m honestly pretty frustrated right now, but I’m here and I’m listening anyway.”*

*“Lord, take all the time you need with me. I’m not going anywhere. And when I do leave this spot, help me keep my ears open throughout the day – even in the noise, even in the silence. I want to hear what you’re really trying to tell me.”*

The world’s only gotten noisier since Samuel’s time, but God’s voice hasn’t gotten any quieter. Maybe we just need to remember how to tune in.

“Prayer is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us.” Teresa of Avila

“Speak, Lord. I’m listening.”

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## Angel View

“So, what’s shaken’ down there?” Gabe asked Raphael, a seasoned guardian of an American church.

“Looks like they’ve gathered to worship,” Raphael said as he squinted down at the entrance.

“What’s that lady carrying in? Looks like some kind of

package," Gabe asked

"Probably a casserole," came the matter-of-fact response.

"A casserole?"

"Must be having a special 'something-or-other' after worship."

Gabe tilted his head, confused. "So, this is what they call worship?" Gabe had been assigned to the churches in Asia, where they worship secretively. So, it was a little startling to see that big cross and that sign out there in front of God and everybody.

"No pastors getting whisked away to sketchy tribunals? No believers getting disappeared?" He paused, taking in the half-empty parking lot. "So, you mean to tell me they're free to worship? No restrictions? Crowd seems a little on the lighter side."

"Well, they have more options over here. They can stream, listen to other pastors, or get the highlights on TikTok. Plus, YouTube is full of pastors that are, according to them, more viral. I think they're just used to worship. They're comfortable with it all, and they just want to come whenever it fits into their plan."

"Really?"

"I'm not kidding. I've been watching over this church for years. Lots of churches in North America are like this. It's more of a social thing."

Their conversation was interrupted by raised voices from the church steps. "Hey, look over there! That guy looks pretty upset."

Raphael sighed. "I expected this. It's been boiling for quite some time now."

"What's been boiling?"

"This feud. It started on X. Those two guys have been egging each other on for weeks. They're all in a fuss over the church finances."

Gabe's eyes widened. "That church has money?"

"Of course. This is America, the richest nation in the world. The church even pays its leaders."

"Wow!"

But it's deeper than that. This church is filled with people who are all focused on all the MAGA controversies, still arguing about Covid, where it came from, lots of other stuff too, Epstein files, whatever..."

As they watched the congregation settle into their cushioned chairs, Gabe grew restless. "I can't wait to see what worship is like. When does it start?"

"It already has."

Gabe observed the scene below with growing bewilderment. "That's worship? Everyone's watching. Nobody's doing anything!"

"They're tired. They're a very busy group: travel ball, fellowships, their jobs, their hobbies and Netflix rolled out three new limited series. It's a lot," Raphael explained with practiced patience.

"Are they just going to sit there?"

"No, they'll stand a time or two. With those padded chairs, I can't say I'd blame them for sitting."

The singing began, and Gabe listened intently. "Who's the guy with the mic?"



"That's the band leader. He leads them in a kind of group karaoke. They follow along on the screens."

Gabe squinted down at the stage. "Nice wings on his tattoo, though. Quite impressive artwork."

The service continued, and when someone came to the microphone, Gabe leaned forward expectantly. "Finally, they're praying!"

"Enjoy it while it lasts, they don't really pray much. Hardly ever in private... Prayer closets are rare and prayer meetings are filled with lots of medical jargon. This is the extent of being 'prayed up' for most of them"

As the service wound down, Gabe looked at the empty tank behind the stage. "I guess that's the baptistry."

"Right. It broke a couple of years ago. Something with the plumbing went haywire but they don't really miss it anyway."

Raphael studied his companion's troubled face and asked, "What do you think happened to them?"

"Kind of a Laodicea situation?" Gabe observed."

"Right. No passion. No change. Just check the box and get back home before the game."

"If only they could have seen what we saw in the first few centuries of the church."

"Or even the Christians across the ocean who face persecution right now ."

As the service concluded and people began filtering out, chatting casually about weekend plans and rating the sermon, Raphael yawned and said, "Gabe, I miss the days when things were cookin' in America and I'm not talking casseroles."

"Sorry, bud. You've got a tough assignment," Gabe said

empathetically. “Well, I’d better head to our division staff meeting. We just got prayed into some new assignments from believers in Nepal, Bangkok, Tehran, and Bogota.”

“You always get to go to where the action is. I’m stuck with Americans impressing each other on Instagram.”

“Hang in there, Raphy. Things could turn on a dime here. All it takes is a remnant.” Gabe said as he patted Raphael on the back.

“I hope so. It’s been a while,” Raphael said to himself gravely as he watched Gabe disappeared into the evening sky.

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## What If We Actually Believed?

There’s a thought experiment that haunts me: What would happen if we took the Bible seriously? Not just as a collection of inspiring stories or moral guidelines, but as the actual Word of God that should fundamentally reshape how we live, love, and engage with the world around us.

The primary foundation of any authentic faith movement should be “Believing the Bible as the Word of God.” But here’s the radical part—what if we actually lived like we believed it?

## Love Without Borders

When Jesus said “love your enemies,” He wasn’t speaking metaphorically or offering a gentle suggestion for our consideration. He was laying down a revolutionary principle that should make the church the most confounding institution on earth. Imagine if we actually loved everybody—even our enemies—to such an extent that our enemies would look at the

church and say, “Wow, those crazy people love me!”

This isn't the sanitized, comfortable love we often practice within our church walls. This is the kind of love that crosses political lines, racial boundaries, and ideological divides. It's the love that makes people scratch their heads and wonder what on earth has gotten into us.

## **A Consistent Respect for Life**

If we truly held a radical respect for life, our witness would become beautifully consistent. We'd fight as vehemently against the death penalty as we do against abortion. We'd recognize that being pro-life means protecting life at every stage, in every circumstance, without the convenient exceptions that align with our political preferences.

This consistent ethic of life would make us uncomfortable allies to many and perfect allies to none—which is exactly where the church should be when it's truly following Christ rather than partisan politics.

## **Listening Like Jesus**

Too often, we have become known more for winning debates than for loving people. But what if we listened to people the way Jesus listened to them? Instead of feeling compelled to win arguments and exclude those with opposing viewpoints, what if we created spaces where people felt heard, valued, and welcomed?

Jesus had this remarkable ability to make people feel seen and understood, even when He disagreed with their choices. He listened first, loved always, and let transformation happen naturally through relationship rather than through rhetorical conquest.

# Seeing Christ in the Poor



The Bible is crystal clear about how we should treat poor people—as human representations of Christ Himself. Yet somehow we’ve managed to create elaborate theological justifications for why this doesn’t apply to our economic policies or personal generosity.

What if we actually believed that when we encounter someone in need, we’re encountering Jesus? How would that change our budget priorities, our voting patterns, our daily interactions with those society has pushed to the margins?

## Going Instead of Staying

We’ve become remarkably comfortable with staying put, building bigger buildings, and creating more programs for ourselves. But Jesus called His followers to “go.” We should be more compelled to move toward the world’s pain than to retreat into our sanctuaries.

This doesn’t mean everyone needs to become a missionary, but it does mean the church should be fundamentally oriented

outward rather than inward. We should be known more for what we're bringing to the world than for what we're protecting ourselves from.

## **Cleansing the Temple**

Jesus didn't just teach about spiritual purity—He grabbed a whip and drove the money changers out of the temple. Maybe it's time for some serious temple self-cleansing programs to purge the church of widespread commercialism and politics.

What would it look like if our denominational leaders were seen more often with mops and wrenches than with microphones and marketing materials? What if they were known for their service rather than their strategies, their humility rather than their platforms?

## **New Heroes**

Our heroes should once again be found in mud huts and rice fields half a world away instead of in corner offices and television studios. The people we celebrate should be those who are sacrificially loving the world rather than those who are successfully managing religious enterprises.

This isn't to diminish the importance of leadership and organization, but rather to remember what we're organizing toward and who we're leading people to become.

## **A Little Holy Rebellion**

And here's where things get fun: for every preacher who tries to turn the church into a political organization, they should be fair game for wedgies. (Okay, maybe that's taking it too far, but you get the point.)

The church loses its prophetic voice when it becomes an

extension of any political party. We're called to be a peculiar people, not a predictable voting bloc.

## The Challenge

This vision might sound impossible, naive, or even dangerous to some. Good. The gospel has always been a little dangerous to the status quo. It's always challenged comfortable arrangements and safe assumptions.

The question isn't whether this kind of radical faith is practical or politically expedient. The question is whether it's biblical. And if it is—if this is what it actually means to believe the Bible as the Word of God—then maybe it's time to stop making excuses and start making changes.

What would your church look like if it actually believed? What would your life look like? What would the world think of a church that loved this radically, served this consistently, and believed this authentically?

Maybe it's time to find out.

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## Israel, Gideon and a Bug's Life

Remember the movie "A Bug's Life"? If you have kids, you've probably watched it countless times—children love repeating their favorite films over and over. In that animated classic, a colony of ants lives in constant terror of the grasshoppers who swoop in like a plague, devouring everything in sight. The ants cower and hide, always wondering when the next attack will come, living their lives in fear of when the enemy will

return.

This vivid picture perfectly captures the situation we find in Judges 6, where the Israelites faced their own version of grasshoppers—the Midianites. Just like those animated ants, God's people were hiding in caves and strongholds, paralyzed by fear, never knowing when their enemies would strike next.

Fear has a way of making us feel small. Whether it's that uncomfortable meeting with the boss or facing circumstances that seem insurmountable, we all know what it's like to feel overwhelmed and inadequate. Yet within each of us—regardless of our perceived weaknesses—lies a warrior that God sees and wants to use.

The story of Gideon in Judges 6-7 reveals a profound truth: God doesn't see us the way we see ourselves. He sees the warrior within, even when we're cowering in fear, much like those frightened ants who would eventually discover their own courage.

## **When Fear Takes Hold**

The Israelites found themselves in a desperate cycle that feels all too familiar. They had rebelled against God, leading to isolation, then bondage under their enemies, the Midianites. Like locusts, these enemies would swoop in and destroy everything the Israelites had worked for, leaving them hiding in caves and strongholds.

This cycle—rebellion, isolation, bondage—mirrors patterns we see in our own lives. When we distance ourselves from God, we often find ourselves isolated from others as well. That isolation creates a void we try to fill with other things: alcohol, drugs, pornography, or countless other substitutes for the soul connection that only Jesus can provide.

But there's hope in this cycle. When we reach the end of

ourselves, when we cry out to the Lord in our helplessness, He is faithful to respond with deliverance.

## The Unlikely Warrior

Enter Gideon—hardly the picture of a mighty warrior. We find him threshing wheat in a winepress, hiding from the very enemies God would soon call him to defeat. Yet when the angel of the Lord appeared to him, the greeting was startling: “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor.”

This reminds me of a personal experience that perfectly captures how God sees us differently than we see ourselves. During seminary, I worked as a jailer—a job I was completely unsuited for. I wasn’t tough, didn’t have the “spiritual gift” of being a jailer, and dreaded the day I had to get certified on the rifle range.

I’d never really shot a rifle before, except for hunting squirrels with my grandfather in Louisiana. Standing on that windy day in Fort Worth, Texas, watching these burly, experienced marksmen struggle to hit even one or two clay targets, I felt like Don Knotts—shaking with fear and nerves. I needed to hit seven out of twelve to get certified, but I just prayed to hit one so I wouldn’t be completely humiliated.

They called me “preacher boy” and saved me for last. As I stood there, rifle trembling in my hands, I whispered one more prayer: “Lord, just let me hit one.” The first clay target flew out, and somehow—boom—I hit it. Then the second. By the end, I was the only one to get certified that day, hitting eight out of twelve while seasoned marksmen looked on in amazement.

In that moment, I understood Gideon. I was the unlikely candidate, shaking in fear, yet God saw something in me that I couldn’t see in myself. Just as the angel called Gideon “mighty man of valor” while he cowered in a winepress, God



sees the warrior in us even when we feel most inadequate.

Gideon's response reveals his mindset: doubt, questions, and complaints about God's apparent absence. "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" he asked. Sound familiar? We often get stuck asking "why" when God wants to move us to "what"—what He's calling us to do next.

Despite Gideon's protests about being from the weakest clan and the least in his family, God's response was simple and powerful: "Surely I will be with you." This phrase—"I will be with you"—might be the most powerful promise we can cling to. As the psalmist wrote, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

## God's Unconventional Strategy

When Gideon finally assembled an army, he gathered 32,000 men. But God said it was too many. After allowing the fearful to leave, 22,000 departed. Then, through an unusual test involving how the men drank water, God whittled the army down to just 300 men—less than 1% of the original force.

Why would God do this? Because when we rely on our own strength and resources, we get the glory. But when God uses the small, the broken, and the unlikely, everyone knows it had to be divine intervention.

God equipped these 300 men not with swords and shields, but with trumpets, empty jars, and torches. Hardly conventional weapons of war, yet they contained profound spiritual symbolism that would later be echoed by the apostle Paul.

## Three Symbols of Spiritual Warfare

**The Trumpet** represents proclamation. Every time we speak the name of Jesus, we're wielding the most powerful trumpet

imaginable. Our testimony, our witness, our proclamation of Christ's lordship—these are weapons that confuse and defeat the enemy.

**The Jar** symbolizes brokenness. Just as the men had to break their jars to reveal the light within, God must break us to use us effectively. Like bread broken to feed thousands, our brokenness becomes the means through which God's power flows.

**The Torch** represents God's glory. Hidden within the clay jars until the moment of revelation, the light points to the glory of God shining through fragile human vessels.

Centuries later, Paul would write in 2 Corinthians 4:5-7 about how we carry this treasure in jars of clay, making it clear that the power comes from God, not ourselves. Gideon lived this truth before Paul wrote it.

## **The Power of Unified Minority**

Here's a crucial principle: a unified minority always confuses the enemy. Satan thrives on division, schisms, and clicks within the church. But when a small group of people agrees together in the Lord, amazing things happen.

Those 300 men, following Gideon's lead, surrounded the enemy camp. At the signal, they blew their trumpets, broke their jars, and revealed their torches, shouting "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" The resulting confusion caused the Midianite army to turn on itself.

## **Your Warrior Calling**

What does this mean for us today? First, recognize that God sees the warrior in you, regardless of how inadequate you feel. You might be hiding in your own version of a winepress, but God is calling you a "mighty man [or woman] of valor."

Second, remember that Jesus is with you. This simple truth can transform any situation. You may have lost your job, but Jesus is with you. You may be facing illness, but Jesus is with you. You don't need anything else beyond this assurance.

Third, be willing to let God break you. Our brokenness isn't something to hide from—it's the very thing God uses to shine His light through us to a dark world.

Finally, don't be overwhelmed by the size of the opposition. God doesn't need an army of thousands when He has a few faithful people willing to follow His unconventional methods.

The same God who gave Gideon victory with 300 men and clay pots is ready to work through you today. The question isn't whether you're qualified—it's whether you're willing to let the warrior within step forward in faith, knowing that Jesus is with you.

Your winepress moment might just be the beginning of your greatest victory.

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## The Beggar in Legalville

The grocery cart announced Jed's arrival long before he came into view. The front-left wheel squealed with each rotation, a metallic protest that had become his signature sound in Legalville.

Jed didn't notice the town's pitiful glances. After fifteen years of collecting cans and bottles, he had perfected the art of being simultaneously visible and invisible. Visible enough that people would set aside their recyclables for him. Invisible enough that they wouldn't feel obligated to engage.

His cardboard refrigerator box stood in the narrow alley between First National Bank and Trust and Renaldo's Bar and Grill—another of life's ironies that was lost on no one but Jed himself. Each night, he would carefully maneuver through the flap he'd cut as a door, settle onto his frayed sleeping bag, and count the day's earnings. On good days, it might be enough for a can of generic dog food. On exceptional days, he might splurge on a dented can of beans from the discount shelf. This had been Jed's life for so long that he couldn't remember anything else. Legalville's boundaries were the boundaries of his world, and the daily rhythm of collection and survival was the only song he knew.

Until Tuesday.

The man in the charcoal suit looked comically out of place standing before Jed's cardboard home, his polished shoes reflecting the afternoon sun. He held a leather briefcase in one hand and a document in the other.

"Mr. Jedidiah Lawrence?" the man asked, squinting at the paper.

Jed froze, his cart half-filled with the morning's findings. Nobody had called him by his full name in years. Most folks in town didn't even know he had a last name.

"That's me," he answered cautiously.

"My name is Thomas Blackwell, attorney-at-law." The man extended his hand, then awkwardly retracted it when Jed didn't reciprocate. "I have some news that I believe will be of great interest to you."

Fifteen minutes later, Jed sat on an overturned milk crate, staring at the document in his dirty hands. The words blurred before his eyes, but the number remained crystal clear: \$2,000,000.

"Your uncle, Gerald Lawrence, passed away last month. Having no children of his own, he left his considerable estate to your father. Since your father passed away last year, you are the sole heir."

"Two million dollars," Jed whispered.

"Indeed," Thomas nodded. "The funds have already been transferred to an account in your name. This card," he produced a shiny black rectangle, "gives you immediate access to your inheritance."

The next few hours passed in a blur. Someone from the local newspaper got wind of the story, and suddenly Jed's alley was filled with cameras and microphones. People who had walked past him for years were now hanging on his every word.

"What will you do with the money, Jed?" a reporter shouted over the crowd.

"Are you going to move out of Legalville?" asked another.

Jed looked at the eager faces surrounding him, then at his cardboard home. A slow grin spread across his face, revealing the three remaining teeth he possessed.

"I've got it all planned out," he announced.

The crowd leaned in.

"First thing, I'm gonna buy some new cardboard. The good kind, thick and sturdy. Gonna rebuild this place proper-like."

Confused murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"Then," Jed continued, warming to his subject, "no more generic dog food. I'm upgrading to the name brands! And Spam! Do you know how long it's been since I had fried Spam for breakfast?"

A reporter stepped forward, microphone extended. "Jed, you

understand you have two million dollars, right? You could buy a mansion. Travel the world. Never work another day in your life."

Jed nodded enthusiastically. "That's why I'm not stopping there. I'm getting plastic plates instead of paper ones! And the grocery store manager will sell me one of those big carts if I offer enough. Think of all the cans I could collect with a cart twice this size!"

The crowd fell silent.

"He doesn't get it," a woman whispered to her companion. "He just doesn't get it."

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Jed's story sounds absurd, doesn't it? And yet many of us do exactly that."

We have been given an inheritance beyond calculation. We are not distant relatives of royalty—we are children of the King himself. We have been transferred from one kingdom to another, from darkness to light. But how many of us are still pushing squeaky spiritual grocery carts through life? How many of us are settling for slightly better versions of our old existence rather than embracing the completely new life we've been given? The inheritance is already yours. The declaration has been made. But like Jed, many of us can't look beyond our slum life into our new reality.

Your inheritance in Christ isn't something you have to earn or deserve. It's already yours—not because of anything you've done, but because of everything He has done.

The Father has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. He has rescued you from the dominion of darkness and brought you into the kingdom of His Son.

Today, you can choose to step out of your spiritual cardboard box. You can leave behind the dog food of the world. You can embrace your true identity and the unfathomable riches that are already yours in Christ.

Not because you've earned it.

Not because you deserve it.

***But because you are loved.***

And that makes all the difference.

*"Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves."* Colossians 1:12-13

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## Red Beans and Rice, Cher!

My son, Jacob, asked me for my Red Beans and Rice Recipe. I didn't give him the recipe like it was given to me. Otherwise it would sound something like this:

*Lemme tell you how we do it way down da bayou, bébé.*

*First t'ing, you take dem red kidney beans, put 'em in a big ol' bowl. Cover dem beans wit' water – 'bout an inch or so over da top, yeah – an' let 'em soak good overnight, let dem swell up nice an' fat.*

*Come da nex' day, you dump dem beans in da colander, rinse all dat dirt an' bad mojo off. Den you slap 'em in a big ol' pot, pour you a coupla cans dat red tomato sauce, maybe a lil' splash water too, just to keep her from dryin' out.*

*Now, when you runnin' roun' dat store, you peek in da frozen*

*box – you gonna find dat Cajun seasonin' mix, got da peppers an' da onions all chopped nice. Dat's easy, easy. But if dey ain't got it, no sweat, cher – you just cut you up some big ol' onions, some fat bell peppers, an' don' forget dat garlic, non! Dat garlic, she make da pot sing, yeah.*

*You track you down some good andouille sausage – not dat city stuff, get da good smokey kind, make your nose dance soon as it hit da pot. Throw it all in dere wit' dem beans, turn dat fire down low, let it bubble, let it talk to you real slow, like a fiddle playin' in da night.*

*When you t'ink maybe she ready, you take one dem beans, mash 'em 'gainst da side o' dat pot – if she smash all soft an' creamy, dat's da Holy Ghost tellin' you it's time, cher.*

*Some folk round here, dey don't use no tomato sauce, mais I tell you straight – dat sauce, she give it da little extra somethin' to make you slap ya mama, it's so good.*

*When dem beans be ready, you heap you a big ol' spoonful right on some fluffy white rice, yeah. An' don' be shy now – you splash a good bit o' dat Tabasco sauce on top, spice it up real nice, make it dance on your tongue like a fais do-do on Saturday night, sha!*

**Dat's how we cook it, true true. Now come pass a good time, yeah!**

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## **Praying With a Squirrel Mind: 5 Blockades and 20 Ways**

I've experienced five major blockades that keep me from



connecting with God and discovered some practical hacks that have helped me overcome my distracted mind.

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## **The Christ Figure in The Brothers Karamazov**

So far, for me, it's been the character I can't escape. Perhaps because there are shadows of the great divine in this part of the story.

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## **Aligning Your Ministry and Work to the Overall Vision of the Church**

Victor was a retired CEO of a hospital supply company in our town, and when he agreed to be a deacon, I was absolutely thrilled. He'd bring so much insight, wisdom, and acumen to our team. He attended our first meeting as we discussed and prayed about the work of our leadership team. From the outset, there was an issue. A huge one. He wanted to singlehandedly change the vision and values of the church. For the next year, it was a push-and-pull affair rife with counterarguments and proposals that seemed to come out of nowhere. Perhaps he missed the thrill of boardroom takeovers or the ability to singlehandedly change things.

We had recently worked across our entire church organization to prayerfully create a mission statement and a long-range plan that stretched our people's view of the church. Adding Victor's force of personality and motives almost cost us three longtime leaders to resign simultaneously. Victor, as gifted as he was, just couldn't align to the plan, and he left everyone frustrated, including himself.

You can't minimize the importance of alignment when it comes to vision and effectiveness in a church leadership team. Misalignment will sabotage the tread life of any team.

Here is an easy way to remember, measure, and evaluate your alignment as leaders. I'd call it the **P.L.A.N.**

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## Purpose

Purpose reflects the important question: **"WHY."** Everything in your church needs to run through this filter. If you have a program or a practice which has no purpose, you are wasting everyone's time. There are many things that knock churches off their purpose. Sometimes it's a shadow mission of a member or a leader. A leader can press others to do something or decide on an initiative because there is something else going on. It could be a personal desire, a resentment, or an unshared agenda.

In other words, a leader may say, "We need to do this program" because of a need they have, or to make themselves look good, or to right a wrong from five years ago. Every leader, whether they are a pastor, staff member, deacon, or volunteer team leader, needs to ask this soul-searching question: **"Why?"** When you lose your "why," you lose your way.

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## Leadership

John Maxwell nailed it when he said, **“Everything rises and falls on leadership.”** For a vision to be realized, every leader needs to think of themselves as a champion of that vision. Our goal as leaders shouldn’t simply be to make more followers but rather to develop new leaders. Being a leader doesn’t mean that you’re going to make all the decisions. Leadership means that you will champion the overall vision of the church through your initiative and enthusiasm. That’s what makes a great leader.

Some leaders believe that their role is simply to filter or inspect the actions of the pastor or other leaders. Although we do need to assess where we are, it’s easy for us to get into an analytic mindset that sabotages the overall vision and purpose of the church. Anyone can stand back and offer opinions, but blessed is the pastor who has leaders that get in the game.

One of the greatest leaders I’ve ever worked with had a simple phrase. Every time there was a consensus for our church to move in a certain direction, he’d simply say, **“Let’s go.”** If he texted it, there would be three or four exclamation marks after the sentence. There was no “How will this affect me?” or “Why was I left out of the decision?” His job was simply to encourage and cheer on the entire team.

If he ever had a concern or disagreement, he would always come to me first before bringing it to the entire group. But usually, when it seemed right to the entire leadership team, he was my “Let’s Go” man. He was never the chairman, but he was always a leader.

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## Attunement

Dr. Dan Siegel defines attunement this way:

**“When we attune with others, we allow our own internal state to shift, to come to resonate with the inner world of another. This resonance is at the heart of the important sense of ‘feeling felt’ that emerges in close relationships.”**

If you are aligned to the overall mission of the church, you’ll want to be attuned to your team. Leaders who are attuned can read the cues of their team members. They pause to think about the “why” questions but not just the “why” question. Attuned leaders are not only group-aware but are also self-aware. In other words, they don’t dominate the discussion but know how to listen, empathize, and ask important questions.

The opposite of attunement might be best described by what the Gottman Institute calls **the four horsemen of the relationship apocalypse**: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. If you’ve been a member of any church or organization for any amount of time, you’ve probably experienced these four horsemen.

If you align your ministry and work to the vision of your church, make sure you stay away from these four horsemen. (They are headless!)

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## Nuance

Along with purpose, leadership, and attunement, an aligned leader also understands the power of nuance. They understand that no person or vision is crafted by cookie cutters or led

by robots. A successful plan in one church or with one team doesn't guarantee the same amount of success in another environment.

Many pastors and leaders know their Bibles—that is paramount. But secondarily, we need to understand our community and adapt our vision to provide strong biblical solutions in the context of our surrounding environment. We must learn to nuance our vision so that our church understands the objectives and ministries.

**Shepherds don't drive their sheep; they lead them.** That's what we should do. And we should do it with a winsome heart and nuance. It will allow you to customize, improvise, and strategize effectively.

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If a church's alignment is off, the tread-life will be short. To be in proper alignment, we must know our **PURPOSE**, practice healthy **LEADERSHIP**, **ATTUNE** our minds, and adapt with **NUANCE**.