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1

LOOK AT THIS!



***L*uke 21:29-31: He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”**

“I climbed the Rocky Mountains once,” I said, squinting hard as I searched my mind for an exciting story worthy of sharing at church this week. It seemed like every other day was Sunday, and sermons weren’t illustrating themselves, after all. I had to come up with some fresh ideas fast!

My mentor chuckled a little bit as he prodded me. “Come on, Bill, you’re how old?” he said. “And you’re telling me you only have *one* exciting story from your life so far?”

But that’s all that came to mind. Slumped over on the couch of the pastor’s study, it finally dawned on me that my life must be very boring. I had heard a thousand exciting stories from nationally-known preachers – close calls with alligators, car chases down abandoned roads, rescue missions to war-torn countries – but all I had in my own life was one little hiking adventure. What’s even sadder is that part of the reason I agreed to go on the trip was so

that I'd have an interesting story or two to use during speaking engagements.

The famous speakers I admired never seemed to run out of engaging tales, and even the local pastors I have worked with had an endless supply of unbelievable personal anecdotes that never ran out. I wanted some of my own.

That's how this book got started. As a mental exercise, I began to write daily devotional material for a church e-mail list, and to my surprise, day after day, I never ran out of material. What I found totally changed the way I looked at God and His world.

God is all around! His fingerprints are everywhere!

You don't have to lead the most daring life to find Him. I found that He's present in metaphysical theories and on tennis courts, in the beauty of a thirty-foot waterfall and in the power of a lightning strike. No matter who you are or what life you lead, you too can learn to see God everywhere you go!

* * *

When I began collecting stories for this book, I viewed my task as a one-time brainstorm for preachers only... just a good way to create a list of sermon illustrations that would come in handy in the future. But when I finished the last page, I was convinced this process was something everyone should learn to do too.

I believe we all should go through life constantly searching for God's fingerprints – redemptive reflections in everyday moments, concrete examples of intangible concepts.

I love that we can take something so abstract as faith and find

words and images and sounds and stories that make it understandable, not just to other people, but to ourselves also.

It's vital we do so because that's how we learn! When I think back on all my years in school, the things I remember best are the concepts that were made the most concrete. I still remember what the economic term "utility" means because of a professor's example using Häagen-Dazs ice cream. I won't tell the whole analogy, but let's just say I'll never forget what utility is, and I'm now quite addicted to several Häagen-Dazs flavors, including the chocolate raspberry one – mmm, now that's utility!!!

Christian spirituality can be a lot harder to understand than the most difficult economic terminology... especially to those outside our little Christian bubble. Think of all the people you interact with on a daily basis. Some do not regularly attend church. Many haven't had faithful parents who took time to teach them about the Bible. Yet how do we often approach these people? We come at them with a few poorly produced tracts, a mouthful of spiritual terminology that they don't understand, and Scripture in an antiquated form of the English language no one has spoken conversationally in four hundred years!

What do they learn from that kind of encounter? 1) God doesn't speak my language. 2) Faith doesn't make sense. 3) Christians care about me more as a project than as a person.

But that's how we share the truth of God with the world. And it's a shame! How much more effective would we be if we interacted with others like Jesus did? He loved people! He invested in lives! And He spoke in plain language they could understand.

For evidence, just look at the number of parables He told. He

put abstract concepts into concrete stories. And look at how often he said, "Look at this!" He did it all the time, including the parable of the fig tree quoted above.

"Look at the fig tree... Look at this coin... Look at the birds of the sky... Look at the lilies of the field... Look at the bread... Look at the wine... Look at this!" He was always building conceptual bridges so that people could understand complex spiritual ideas through concrete, memorable stories and experiences. Shouldn't we do the same?

FOR APPLICATION TODAY: The best way to start a spiritual discussion with your coworkers or classmates may be to find a good object lesson and say: "Look at this!"

Give it a try! But remember, you *first* have to open your eyes wide enough to see God's fingerprints in your own life before you can point others to them!

And second, take time to praise God today for speaking to us in concrete terms we can understand. Even Jesus Himself was the ultimate "show and tell" – the spiritual made flesh and blood so we could touch and see and understand (John 14:9, Hebrews 1:2). What a great price God paid so that we could grasp divinity!

13

FORGIVEN → FORGIVING

***C*olossians 3:13: Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so also you must forgive.**

She says there's still a part of her that can feel the bitter chill of that winter morning on her cheeks. Some would have called it "brisk." She just prefers "cold."

The sound that woke her up that morning wasn't the usual shrill beeping of her alarm clock, which she would have preferred, even as annoying as it was. Instead, it was the sound of a loud crash just outside her window. At first, she thought she was dreaming. But all too quickly, she realized this was no dream and that she had to get out of bed – and fast!

Peering through the blinds, she saw that the neighbor's dogs had just knocked over her trash cans and were busy spreading garbage all over the place. A week's worth of rubbish was quickly covering the driveway and yard. Realizing the longer she waited, the bigger the mess would be, she put on her slippers and coat and headed for the door.

The gust of winter air hit her hard as she opened the door. She had a long day ahead, and this was no way to start it. Barely able to feel her hands in the freezing cold, she began collecting old

pieces of paper, bits of food and other oddities she thought she'd never see again after placing them in the trash a week ago.

"Isn't that amazing," she said under her breath, half-way laughing at the strange situation and what it reminded her of. "Here I am, picking up a week's worth of trash I thought was gone forever. At least I can thank God that He doesn't make me pick up my spiritual trash from the past!"

Laughing out loud at the idea of having such a profound thought at this hour of the morning, she bent over to collect the last remaining pieces of paper. She stopped to read the writing on a few pages before placing them in the bag. Apparently embarrassed, she tore one in half twice before throwing it away again for the second time this week.

Finally finished, she dropped the bag into the garbage can and scurried inside to brew up some coffee and salvage whatever was left of the morning. As usual, she couldn't bear to just sit and watch the slow drip of hot liquid, so she flipped on the computer to quickly check her e-mail before school.

The high-speed Internet connection brought the new messages flying to her screen in no time – almost twenty new e-mails since last check. Some were spam. Most were chain letters someone else apparently thought were funny enough to pass along. Delete. Delete. Delete.

Then, her complexion changed as her eyes scanned ahead. It was the name of a man her eyes found, a man whose name alone was enough to open old wounds. Two years ago, he changed everything in her life, and now she had trouble trusting anyone again. She could feel her heart start beating faster in her chest. She could

even hear her pulse in her ears, almost drowning out that ghostly voice from years ago she had tried hard to forget but never could.

After reading his words, she felt herself go into auto-pilot mode. She was typing fast, making a lot of mistakes, but she didn't care at this point. By the time she hit send, it was clear her past was anywhere but in the past.

* * *

Isn't it amazing how we hold onto the past? God takes away our trash permanently, "deleting" our sins forever so we'll never have to face them again. But when someone sins against *us*, it's a different story.

I know people who boast about how long they can hold a grudge. Even I have a hard time forgiving others sometimes. There are people I encounter every week that I can barely look in the eye. Sure, they're nice to me now, but I know what they're capable of. I was there when their voice sounded totally different. I was there when their eyes were filled with hatred. I was there when their tempers got the best of them. I was there when they took it out on me, when they used me as an emotional punching bag, when they didn't care how it made me feel.

And so, we say the right things. Things like: I forgive you. No problem. It's nothing. Don't worry about it. It's in the past.

But is it?

What is it about me that makes me automatically replay their hurtful insults in my head every time I see them? What is it about me that makes me want to get even, or at least to make it clear to

them that what they did was not OK? What is it about me that actually wants to keep that old wound open and raw?

Today, I searched an online Bible for the word “forgiveness,” and do you know what I found? Almost every time the concept comes up, God’s forgiveness of us is linked to our forgiveness of others. Scripture paints a vivid picture of the fullness and finality of our forgiveness. And then it takes the concept one step further. It doesn’t say, “The Lord has forgiven you, so be happy and do whatever you want!” No, the second half of the thought is almost always a mirror image of the first: “So *you* must also forgive.”

It’s as if God thinks it’s impossible for us to grasp what it’s like to be *forgiven* if we aren’t *forgiving*.

Forgiving others paints a picture of God. Each act of forgiveness points to the One who forgave a much greater debt. Each act of forgiveness points others to God’s mercy. And maybe even more importantly, each act of forgiveness points us again to our own salvation. Each time we forgive, we create a fingerprint of God in this world – a picture of the gracious God who gave His only Son over to death so He could say, “Your sins are gone forever, taken away as far as the East is from the West. You are forgiven!”

FOR APPLICATION TODAY: Even though God has buried your sins in the sea of forgetfulness, do you regularly bring up other people’s wrongs from the past? Is there someone you need to forgive? Maybe it’s not a specific someone. Maybe it’s just a general attitude toward the world. Maybe it’s yourself. If God has forgiven us, we must forgive ourselves too.

FORGIVEN → FORGIVING

Take time today to stand under the waterfall of the grace of God again and let His extravagant love overflow into the hours and minutes of today!