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INTRODUCTION

The Scriptures define Jesus followers as a peculiar people, and rightly so, for we follow One who upends the world's assumptions and expectations at every turn.

- Born to a teen mother in an insignificant town
- Lived a tradesman's humble existence for thirty years
- Challenged the religious and celebrated with outcasts
- Rejected the demands of the crowd to seize earthly position and power
- Told stories about the first as last... better to give than receive... losing life to find it
- Went willingly to the cross to die unjustly as a criminal
- Sprang up from the dead



Up·end [*uhp-ēnd*] verb (used with object): 1) to set on end, as a barrel or ship; 2) to affect drastically or radically, as tastes, opinions, reputations, or systems; 3) to defeat in competition, as in boxing or business.¹

Jesus did more than turn tables in the temple; He turned all of life upside down. Yet even for many of us who claim to follow Him, our lives are not peculiar at all.

If anything, we are a rather predictable people.

We have settled into a routine of expectations and assumptions shaped by social mores and respectable habits. We are middle creatures—most comfortable in a space that demands neither too much nor too little. Church on Sunday, work on Monday. A percentage of our paychecks. A few minutes of prayer.

We follow an upside-down God yet live right-side-up lives.

Yes, we often hear pleas for more radical living. Sometimes we yearn for it. But often *radical* ends up being just an idea, a theme for talks and books, conferences and blog posts.² We are tempted to imagine we can put it on like a wristband or attain it by association with the right causes or leaders. We commit to grand goals, then wonder why we fail soon after.

The revolution Jesus sowed in human hearts was not a logo to wear or brand to cultivate. Nor did it hold much in common with the gleaming eyes of the zealot or the prophet's tangled beard. It was not a fist raised in the air or beret on the head, identifying its wearer as a *real* radical.

Following Jesus is usually subtler, less obvious...and often far more costly.

That's why this book isn't about big choices that make us radical. It's mostly about small choices that begin to mirror the life of One who was radical indeed.

QUESTIONS THAT BRING LIFE

Let's start with a few questions.

Becca graduated from college last year, hungry to harness her learning and live out her faith. She wanted to serve well, wherever she could be of most use in a hurting world. But a year after graduation, she shared that the gulf between her deepest convictions and her daily life seemed to be growing ever wider. She expressed in dismay, "You see all this pressing need and you hear, 'Do something!' But then you graduate and you think, 'How am I supposed to do something from a cubicle or while I'm doing pizza delivery because I can't get another job?'"

Many of us who are five or ten or fifty years down the road feel the same. No doubt we've heard that we can honor God amidst ordinary tasks. We affirm that it's not just preachers or missionaries who can build God's kingdom and that Christian conviction should invigorate all we do. But still, the lofty ideals of our faith often seem utterly disjointed from what wins our paychecks and fills our weekends. We yearn for a greater *integration* between eternal truth and daily life yet often feel the two remain largely disconnected.

We ask with some frustration, "Can discipleship to Jesus Christ really make something extraordinary out of ordinary life?"



A friend of ours set his sights on bringing God-honoring influence into Hollywood. After training at one of the world's best film schools, his skills and connections carried him ever deeper into Hollywood's inner circles. But even as his capacity for impact blossomed, his priorities became less and less distinguishable from the culture around him. As he took on a leadership post in a global advertising firm, the world's mold only squeezed more tightly around him. Small compromises led to big ones. Ultimately, the one-time Hollywood missionary landed on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, not as a winsome witness for Christ but in scandal and disgrace. Our friend's fall and the pain that followed ultimately led him homeward. He sought a restored relationship with his wife and God and reset his priorities. But he wishes with all his heart he'd been able to keep his faith and his professional life aligned at each step along the way.³

Stories like his are rewritten every day. As it is sometimes expressed in Washington DC, "He came to change the city, but the city changed him." Learning to be world shapers is no small thing, from local schools and churches to global institutions. But even tougher is to do so without being conformed into its shape ourselves. Some wonder if it is even possible to play significant roles in art or politics, education or commerce—yet also subvert the world's destructive patterns of false progress, soul-consuming technology, and empty success.

So we wisely question, "Can we powerfully influence our culture without being irreversibly influenced in turn?"



The London *Telegraph* broke the tragic story of Simone Back. At 10:53 p.m. on Christmas Day, the forty-two-year-old woman posted aching words on her Facebook page, "Took all my pills be dead soon bye bye everyone." Simone had 1,048 Facebook *friends*. Not one stopped by to knock on her door or even alerted the authorities. By the time Simone's mother heard about the note and called for help, it was too late.⁴

Perhaps few of us live with the isolation and despair Simone Back must have known. But the news reports of her death struck a chord across the UK and beyond. Readers seemed to sense that it said something not only about a lonely woman's lack of real community but our own as well.

Yes, we are more technologically connected than ever before. Just below the surface, however, lurks a vague feeling of disconnection. We long to know and be known, and have endless options for doing so. But amidst dizzying activity and interaction, there remains a grinding absence of real community. It feels a bit like an airport restaurant. Those diners are people who go places, get things done. They have clients and customers in far-off cities such as New York or Bangkok. But there they all are, eating alone.

And we wonder, “Will we ever know the sense of authentic relationship and community we hunger for?”

JESUS AS BOTH MASTER AND MASTERFUL

These questions may seem unrelated. Yet we write this book convinced that all three ultimately share a single answer. Or rather, that the solution is discovered along a singular road. For the two of us, it’s a journey that continues to be the most daunting and exhilarating of our lives.

We’ve both held deep commitment to Christ as long as we can remember. He was our Savior and, we would have said, our Lord as well. Our conviction was sincere and its consequences significant. But we also must admit that often we viewed the abundant life Jesus offered as being mainly about eternity, not today.

Jesus’s death and resurrection stood for us as the axis point of history, but somehow we missed that He was truly masterful at *all* that He did. We knew to the core that Jesus’s words were true and good. Yet they just didn’t translate that well into the daily tasks and activities that filled up nine-tenths of our time. So often, being a Christian looked like little more than being nice and assenting to the right truths.

It wasn’t faith without works; it was faith that didn’t seem to work.

What began to topple all this was not some *new* idea. Rather, we were newly struck by truths that should have been obvious all along. That Jesus is not only good but also smart. That a real disciple doesn’t just attend lectures and do well on tests, but he also emulates the character of the Master. That, as 1 John puts it, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”⁵ That to see Jesus in action is to see the Father, and to be like Jesus in action is to be like the Father. That Jesus wasn’t calling us only to affirm who He is and what He said but also to put it into practice.⁶

Piece by piece these thoughts came into focus around a central theme: *apprenticing to Jesus*.

What did that mean? We had only a shadowy sense at the time. But we

knew it'd require more than lecture and exam learning alone. We'd need to fix our eyes on Jesus *Himself*: how He moved and taught and loved and led. We wanted to see His unparalleled character and ways penetrate every aspect of who we were. Not for any other reason or end, but simply because our hearts longed to know and love Jesus and to follow Him always, whatever that meant and wherever it led.

For this we'd need not just to learn more *about* Jesus but also *from* Him.

TO LOVE, LEAD, AND CONNECT

For us, it seemed that communication would have to be the first—and perhaps most important—aspect of apprenticing to the Master. For starters, communication had always been central to our careers. Most of what we did all day had at least something to do with it, from writing speeches to overseeing interns. It's that way for most people, whether teachers or managers or stay-at-home moms.

If we weren't learning to walk as Jesus throughout the workday, how could we call ourselves His apprentices?

Just as much we wanted Jesus to pervade our personal lives as well. It is no exaggeration to say that how people communicate colors every aspect of their lives: romance and marriage, parenting and friendship, leading small group studies and talking with a lonely student in a bar, interacting with an angry landlord or meeting a frail neighbor on the sidewalk. To become an apprentice to Jesus in communication touches and alters every aspect of life. It grows intimacy and authentic community. It unites our deepest convictions with daily tasks. It builds true character and lasting influence.

That's what we wanted, even if we sensed it'd be costly.

Our motivation wasn't to undertake some wearying new exercise toward religious excellence. It was not a vain attempt to earn God's grace. Nor was it about spiritual manipulation to *win friends and influence people*. Rather, we were compelled by the beauty and power of Jesus Himself, His wisdom and graciousness, humility and strength.

Really, shouldn't that be enough?

We'd observed and worked alongside some of the most skilled communicators in the world, from Washington to New York to Hollywood. In truth, none held a candle to Jesus. And as we looked closer, we found ourselves awed again and again by His way of entering the space of an audience, of embodying abstract concepts in touchable objects, of guiding listeners toward discovery with potent questions, of lavishing attention on

people others ignored. It all was at once so needed and so lacking in even the best communicators we knew.

To become Jesus's apprentice in these things, we were certain, could turn life upside down.

In this book, Section I (chapters 1–2) lays a simple foundation for this vision. Although a bit more *big picture*, this section is the soil from which the rest of the book grows. From there, Section II begins the deeper, hands-on exploration of how to apprentice to Jesus. We focus on one particularly vital aspect of life: the way we communicate. It is learning to love and lead, influence and connect in the unparalleled ways of the Master.

A SMALL KIND OF RADICAL

When we first began exploring these questions, we lived on opposite coasts. Jedd worked as a chief of staff in the California legislature. Erik served as speechwriter to a member of the president's cabinet in Washington DC. Via phone, e-mail, and occasional visits, we reexplored the Gospels together, asking what it would really look like to apprentice ourselves to Jesus as communicators.

Much of what we found along that journey we included in the book *The Revolutionary Communicator*, which we wrote together in 2004. Some of those reflections are found here in this book too.

Yet much changes in seven years. In 2005 Jedd took a job in Washington DC. That year we both moved with our families into old row houses on Capitol Hill, just around the corner from each other. With our wives and children, we shared weekly meals, traded babysitting, and learned ways of loving our neighbors and our neighborhood. We walked together through the thrills of politics and their ugly underbelly, marital conflicts and joys, picnics on the Potomac, miscarriages, triumphs and frustrations at work, and much more.

Meanwhile, communication remained central in our respective jobs also. The two of us met weekly in the *Cosi* restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue to continue exploring together what apprenticeship to Jesus meant for marriage, parenting, friendship, and our professions, day in and day out. It was among the richest seasons of our lives.

Today we again live on opposite coasts. Erik's work took him to New York, and Jedd returned in California. Our friendship continues to deepen, as does our ongoing learning together.

Through it all we've grown only more convinced of how potent it can be

when a woman or man becomes an apprentice to Jesus as a communicator. In every situation, from presidential speeches and national marketing campaigns to loving our wives and nurturing the brood of young children with whom we're blessed, we grow ever more certain that apprenticing to Jesus is a road like none other.

To be clear, the choices it involves don't always maximize bottom line, sell product, or elect political leaders. Sometimes they do. Often they lead along a path in the opposite direction.

Nor will the one who follows Jesus always be easy to spot—at least initially. It's mostly the small choices that set the apprentice apart.

Meeting a true apprentice, others may at first note only that they felt especially well listened to or were helped to see an old truth with remarkable clarity. Over time, however, they may begin to sense that the apprentice is not quite like anyone they've ever encountered. Peculiar. Even radical. But not because of claims worn on the wrist or shirtsleeve, nor even grander things such as moving from the suburbs to the city or leading a nonprofit. Rather because of a quiet vibrancy that animates the apprentice's words and questions, listening and stories. Most of all the observer will likely conclude that he or she has never felt so loved by the communication of another.

That is our hope for our readers. No matter the stage or position, we invite everyone to journey along with us—frequent speakers and those who can't stand a microphone; musicians and farmers; bloggers and junior high Sunday school teachers. It's a road for *all* who want to know Jesus more deeply and to see His unparalleled ways indelibly color every facet of life.

Most steps along the way are little ones. But as we take them, life and leadership and love are inevitably upended—not always how we'd imagined, or even how we'd hoped, but always for the better. Much better.

CONCRETE GRACE

Near the top of Jedd's list of living heroes are Salomon and Mery Hernandez. Even perched on a small stack of books, the aging Guatemalan couple would not reach most Americans' shoulders. Gray now streaks once-black hair, and wrinkles etch their faces. Their eyes, however, still cast sparks, glowing with vibrant life and unconditional welcome.

Salomon and Mery are *Ladinos*. Of the two distinct groups in Guatemalan society, the Ladinos have the upper hand—they're Spanish-speaking, lighter skinned, and generally more well-to-do. On the other side of a vast social chasm are the indigenous Guatemalans, the Mayans. These sharp-featured, dark-skinned people are set apart not only by their culture and native language but also by the poverty that dogs their existence.

Decades ago, when Salomon served as a pastor, the gaping divide between Ladinos and Mayans began to gnaw at the young couple. Here they were, seeking to lead people to be disciples of Jesus. Yet while the Master they claimed to follow consistently rejected such social divides, their own church embraced them.

Salomon and Mery didn't write a manifesto or craft a new sermon series on inclusiveness. Instead, they decided to learn *Quiché*, a Mayan dialect others referred to with derision as "the language of the poor." In fits and starts, their vocabulary grew. News began to spread among local Mayans of "the pastor who speaks *Quiché*." First one Mayan, then others, appeared at the church. Some understood little Spanish, grasping only bits of Salomon's sermons. Still, the fact that he knew *Quiché* drew them. "This man must care about us," they whispered to each other. "He is learning our language."

The Ladinos in the church were not nearly so impressed. Salomon and Mery could not help noticing the concerned glances cast at the newcomers. As time went on, the glances became glares of irritation and muttered complaints. Finally, a group broached the subject with Salomon directly.

They explained, “We’re not sure it is best to have Mayans in our church. They have many diseases. It is not safe for our children. And their smell...”

Salomon gently reminded, “Jesus continually served people Jews hated, the Samaritans, and lepers, and tax collectors, even prostitutes.”

That quieted the complaints, but it was not long before the group was back, this time larger. “We have decided we must build a second church building,” an elder announced, “One for the Mayans, one for us.”

Again Salomon resisted. “If we are going to follow Jesus, we need to grow *together*. We must learn to love and serve each other as a community,” he urged.

Not many were convinced. The ultimatum came a short time later. “Salomon, we will let you make a choice,” they offered, eyes cold. “You can either be our pastor, or you can serve the Mayans. Not both. The decision is up to you.”

Painful as it was, the path was clear. Salomon and Mery had chosen their course long before. They would follow in the way of their Master, whatever the cost. Salomon would be the church’s pastor no more.

Since that time Salomon and Mery have spent much of their lives working with the Mayan people. Some Ladinos still think they are fools to stoop so low. But many Mayans claim they have no better friends than Salomon and Mery Hernandez. And the giving has not been entirely one-sided. Mayan friends delight to invite Salomon and Mery into their homes and to their festivals, or to bring them corn from their fields or freshly harvested *malanga* root. And more than once during Guatemala’s bloody civil war the couple was rescued from death at the hands of Mayan guerillas by friends they had served.

Years ago a man close to Salomon and Mery described to Jedd why the couple had influenced him so deeply. “They *are* thinkers with real theological depth,” he explained. “And if you ask, both of them will share thoughts that will amaze you. But they never start there, with ideas. They start with doing something, acting on what they’ve come to believe. *Then* they talk about it. Not vice versa. Their actions lead their ideas. I *see* what they’re talking about before they say it, so it sticks.”

That is just what Jesus did on His final evening with His disciples. Without a word, He stood up from their shared meal. He stripped down to undergarments and wrapped a towel around His waist, then knelt with a bowl of water to scrub dirt from His disciples’ feet. No doubt He could have simply explained the importance of humbly serving others. But He

knew that wouldn't stick nearly as much as something they could see with their eyes and feel between their toes. Only when He had finished and redressed did He put the idea into words:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”¹

This is the most potent form of concreteness: example. Whenever possible, the apprentice to Jesus desiring to convey an idea will not start by reaching for words. She will ask herself, “Is there something I can *do* that will get this idea across?”

Joel Spolsky, now a respected software CEO, was serving in the Israeli army at age nineteen when he was assigned to work for a hard-driving sergeant major. The sergeant was the terror of the battalion, always dressed impeccably despite the alternating dust and mud of their outpost. He demanded a precision that matched his own well-starched dress uniform and precise manner.

On his first day Joel’s worst fears seemed to be confirmed. The sergeant took him to the officer’s bathroom and informed Joel it’d be his job to keep it clean. But then the sergeant did something entirely unexpected. “Here’s how you clean a toilet,” he said. Then, that fastidious military man, twice Joel’s age and still dressed in his flawless dress uniform, got down on his knees before the porcelain bowl. He scrubbed it with his bare hands until it glistened.

Years later Joel described, “It completely reset my attitude. If he can clean a toilet, I can clean a toilet, I thought. There’s nothing wrong with cleaning toilets. My loyalty and inspiration from that moment on were unflagging.”²

Years later the lesson remained carved into Joel’s mind as he established upscale new offices for his software firm in New York City. The coloring of the window blinds he’d just had installed looked filthy against newly painted walls. They needed to be replaced. A hired handyman could have done the fix-it job in a day. But Joel knew the power of giving a visible example of what he wanted leadership at his firm to look like. So he and his business partner spent two long afternoons hanging blinds in the offices of their junior staff.³ Yes, that cost precious hours from two business owners who needed every second they could spare. But Joel

understood it was investment well worth making. The sergeant major's vivid lesson had stuck and now was echoing across the years to people he'd never met.

MAKING IT TOUCHABLE

Even when we can't live out an idea we wish to convey, we can make it tangible. Thomas Clarkson did that as well as any. When Clarkson began his studies at Cambridge in 1779, slavery existed only in distant British territories. It remained largely out of sight and mind for most English people, Clarkson included. But when the tall, red-haired young man began to study the slave trade for a college essay contest, he was appalled at the brutality and ugliness he began to see.

Soon after writing the paper, Clarkson felt God calling him to give his life to ending the slave trade. But he and other abolitionists faced a major challenge. Because few people in England ever saw slavery firsthand, it rarely crossed their thoughts. The idea of a woman or man enslaved may have struck many as unfortunate, but the evil it represented remained distant and abstract. Clarkson knew he needed to change that if the abolition movement was to gain the broad support it needed to end the trade.

He began to secretly explore the ports of Liverpool and Bristol where slave ships docked. Talking with sailors and others involved in the trade, Clarkson learned specifics of what transpired on the long passage from Africa to the West Indies. He scrupulously recorded what he learned, capturing descriptions and vivid accounts.

Clarkson began to collect implements used in the slave trade—iron manacles, thumbscrews, leg shackles, branding irons, and horrible plierlike devices used to open slaves' jaws to enable force-feeding if they attempted to starve themselves. Alongside these vile tools, Clarkson also collected beautiful objects imported from Africa—from finely woven cloth and jewelry, to products such as palm oil and beeswax.⁴ Their craftsmanship and beauty contrasted sharply with claims that Africans were just crude savages.

As he spoke throughout England, Clarkson exhibited a *box* he created containing many drawers filled with these items. They highlighted benefits of trading goods rather than slaves with Africa. They also made tangible the skill and creativity of African artisans—in essence, their humanity.

Clarkson also acquired a diagram of a slave ship, the *Brookes*. It revealed how 482 human beings could be crammed into the ship's hold. Posters that Clarkson made of the image became the emblem of the abolition movement.

All of these things—the gripping descriptions of slaving, the diagram of the *Brookes*, the brutal tools of the trade, and the quality goods crafted by African hands—made the reasons for abolition inescapably real.

The result was profound. As *The Economist* magazine declared in 2007, “If anyone was the founder of the modern human-rights movement, it was Clarkson.”⁵ The Abolition Project put it this way, “Before Clarkson joined the campaign, it had generated only limited interest amongst the public. Within a few years, Clarkson had turned abolition into the most prominent political issue of the day.”⁶

In all of this Clarkson was simply following as an apprentice to his Lord. Jesus continually found ways to point to visible, touchable objects that embodied the ideas He sought to convey.

Personal Notes: Jedd

Some of my favorite moments working in the White House came outside of Washington, when I'd get to spend time with frontline nonprofits addressing key issues I was working on—from job training initiatives in the States to anti-malaria efforts abroad. During these visits local nonprofit leaders helped me understand their innovative models and how they could be replicated. I heard many unforgettable presentations, but one has stuck with me more than any other.

Typically an organization's presentation included a short speech or two followed by a facilities tour. But at one little Zambian ministry serving people with HIV/AIDS, they did something different. Just a few battered concrete buildings served as the hub for hundreds of volunteer caregivers. Not much to look at. But Lister Chingangu, the vibrant Zambian nurse who'd started the program with her husband, enabled us visitors to truly see and even feel their daily work.

Lister had set up six or seven stations where volunteer caregivers acted out what they did out in the field. At one station a small fire boiled a nutrient-rich mush created to help HIV patients regain strength. Each visitor shared in the bland but nourishing meal. At another station a volunteer modeled palliative care; she knelt over a woman on a bed mat, tenderly washing her neck and face with a cloth.

At another station a woman lay in a wheelbarrow. She showed how volunteers formerly transported patients too sick to walk to a clinic to get treatment, often several miles or more. Next to her a transport volunteer sat on the wheelbarrow's replacement: a new bicycle constructed with a flat “seat” in back to carry a patient. His smile gleamed as he motioned from the wheelbarrow to the bicycle. “You have made our job very easy for us,” he declared.

Each of those scenes of grace and mercy remain etched in my mind. I can't imagine that words or PowerPoint alone could have even come close.

It is the climactic final day of the yearly Feast of Tabernacles. A great procession of priests and worshipers descend from the Temple Mount to the Pool of Siloam. From the pool, a priest fills a pitcher. Then the congregation again climbs the Temple Mount. There, amidst ceremony and singing, the high priest lifts the pitcher and pours its water over the altar.

The Feast of Tabernacles takes place toward the end of the Mediterranean's dry season, so the land is parched. The ceremony reminds poignantly of thirst—both of the land and its people—and also of God's gift of water to quench that thirst. It was here, standing alongside this tangible reminder of God's thirst-slaking provision, that Jesus proclaimed, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."⁷

Again and again Jesus did the same: connected abstract ideas to physical objects.

When Jesus's disciples began to squabble over status, He did not merely explain the significance of humility and service. Instead He asked a little child to stand beside Him. Then He expressed, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest."⁸

When challenged to either affirm or reject paying taxes to pagan Rome, Jesus held up a coin. Imprinted with the image of Caesar, the coin itself declared that it had been minted by an earthly king. God deserves our full allegiance, Jesus affirmed, but it was no affront to God to return to Caesar a portion of what Caesar had created.⁹

Seeking to explain that God valued the generosity of the poor as much as the generosity of the rich, Jesus pointed to a widow shuffling through the temple courts. She'd given an offering worth just a fraction of a penny. "I tell you the truth," said Jesus, "this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."¹⁰

Even Jesus's miracles often served a similar purpose. Yes, they were signs confirming Jesus's identity, bringing wondrous good to the people they affected. But also, Jesus's miracles consistently made visible the ideas He spoke of. Miraculous feedings made God's provision *tastable*. Water-turned-wine made the promise of a grand feast at the end of time drinkable. Healings made the coming restoration of all things tangible. As George MacDonald put it, through miracles Jesus put "into visible form

that which before he had embodied in words. All shapes of argument must be employed to arouse the slumbering will of men.”¹¹

MAKING IT VISIBLE WITH WORDS

Personal Notes: Jedd

I love observing my friend Tom Davis communicate as he seeks to spur Christians to care for orphans. Sure, it’s easy to get a person to nod in sympathy for destitute children. But Tom knows more is required to grow real conviction and lasting response.

Tom’s first book was a straightforward presentation of global need and the Bible’s explicit call to “defend the fatherless.” Clear and concise, *Fields of the Fatherless* has led many a reader to fuller understanding and action.¹² But more recently Tom has been writing novels. In his compelling stories he takes readers deep into the struggles and hopes of children growing up without the love and protection of family. The gnawing of hunger. The terror of human trafficking. As a reader, your hopes rise and fall with the characters; your pulse quickens in danger and distress.

In the 1850s, the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* helped Americans see and feel the realities of slavery. Today, Tom Davis’s novels enable readers to see and feel the plight of orphans around the world, impacting more deeply than statistics or moral pleas alone ever could.

When Tom speaks, he makes things tangible as well. Gripping stories form the backbone of his remarks. And alongside the narratives, Tom incorporates physical objects as well. I still recall how two years ago, when he spoke about how an orphan girl had been forced into prostitution, Tom held up a hand towel taken from the very bathhouse where the girl had been compelled to work. The image, simple as it was, lingers with me still. It made the story more real and tangible for everyone who heard it and caused it to stick with us long and deep.

With stories and physical objects, Tom Davis brings distant need near. He makes hazy issues as real as a towel or a pounding heart.

It isn’t always possible to make an idea visible via example or objects. But even when relying entirely upon words, Jesus took abstract concepts and made them powerfully concrete.

As we’ll explore more in the next chapter, Jesus’s favorite mode of communication was the story. Almost every page of the Gospels bears a parable Jesus told. These stories—of rebellious sons and tender fathers, callous clergymen and sprouting grain, lost coins and wandering sheep—all imbedded rich meaning within the vivid imagery of story.

Even when not using narrative, Jesus continually painted vivid word pictures. His disciples were not merely to be “a good influence” but to carry the savor and preservative influence of salt.¹³ Jesus Himself was “the bread

of life.”¹⁴ He offered “living water.”¹⁵ His kingdom carried the potential for explosive growth of a mustard seed,¹⁶ the leavening of bread yeast,¹⁷ and the immense but unrecognized value of hidden treasure.¹⁸

Charles Spurgeon, himself one of Christian history’s greatest communicators, urged young pastors-to-be to follow Jesus’s model in this. Using tangible language and illustrations is both a “duty and necessity,” instructed Spurgeon, so “that they might be both interesting and instructive.” Spurgeon concluded, “A sermon without illustrations is like a room without windows.”¹⁹

CONCRETE GRACE

When we communicate like Jesus in this, whether via personal example, story, word picture, or physical object, we echo the incarnation. We bring the distant near and make abstract concrete. Ideas grow more real, sink deeper, last longer. Words become flesh.

In late 2010, just weeks after burying her husband, Dr. Tom Little’s wife recounted the story that began the last chapter. Reflecting upon the legacy of Tom’s life and death in Afghanistan, she concluded:

In communities where power rules, strength prevails, where you work hard to attain honor and avoid shame, where you get what you deserve, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, this talk about God’s grace, the vulnerability of God, and His loving-kindness is too foreign. It’s too distasteful. It’s almost repulsive. It needs to come in small doses over a long stretch of time...

I think if Tom were here today, he would say that in these difficult places, grace, God’s grace, is not something that you discuss. It’s not something you debate. The idea of God taking on a form of weakness of a human being, coming in the body of Jesus, laying down His life, dying for us, has to be seen. It has to be experienced...²⁰

Yes, experienced. *Seen. Tasted. Smelled. Felt.* And heard too in words that depict lofty truths in tangible ways. If our words are to be understood and sink deep, we must make them concrete. Always.