


LOVING MESSY PEOPLE



Messy Loving ^ People

*The Messy Art of Helping
One Another Become
More Like Jesus*





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Loving Messy People

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APPRECIATION FOR *LOVING MESSY PEOPLE*

Rich in stories, practical in application, pastoral in tone, and crisp in content, *Loving Messy People* draws our gaze towards the reality of human messiness with a full mind and a fresh voice. In these pages we discover that the disordered life we all inhabit responds and flourishes under *gospel care*—the grace-saturated, cross-empowered love that emerges within a soul and community as they become more like Jesus. If you're like me and need help with your messy life, or you just want to help others to take simple steps forward out of chaos, buy and give away *Loving Messy People*.

Dave Harvey

President of Great Commission Collective

Founder of AmICalled.com

Author of *When Sinners Say I Do*, *Rescuing Ambition*,
and *I Still Do*

Some people may look at the church and assume (wrongly) that Christians are people who have it all together. But the truth is that Christians are people who know, first of all, that they don't have it together—that they are in need of a Savior. Scott Mehl knows that's true because he's been a pastor who has lived life with messy people, but he also knows it because he knows himself. He knows he's a mess, too, and so he brings to the care of people practical answers that really do help and a love for the gospel that alone has the power to transform lives. If you want to help messy people, or if you are one, then this book is for you.

Elyse M Fitzpatrick

Author of *Counsel from the Cross*

In a culture where people usually bail when relationships get difficult, the church desperately needs to learn how to embrace the mess and experience the very depth of community for which we were made. In *Loving Messy People*, Scott Mehl proves to be a helpful guide. With theological insight and practical tools, Mehl teaches how to love people the way Jesus did so we can become the people Jesus made us to be. I hope this book gets read widely.

Jeremy Treat

Pastor for Preaching and Vision at Reality LA in Los Angeles, California

Adjunct Professor of Theology at Biola University

Author of *Seek First* and *The Crucified King*

The gospel of Jesus Christ radically saves and sanctifies us, bringing us into real relationship with God and with one another. Through the gospel, God creates a gospel community—the church—and calls us to love one another like Jesus. The problem is that loving messy people is hard. And we're not Jesus. But God is good. Our Lord empowers and equips everyone he calls through the power of the gospel.

Loving Messy People is a biblical treasure chest of encouragement, hope, pastoral wisdom, and practical instruction that brings the gospel to life and enables the reader to not only discover and learn but actually implement and reproduce gospel care and love. It is an essential tool for any pastor or Christian looking to effectively and biblically love and serve others in the power and likeness of Jesus Christ. Scott Mehl puts the gospel in “3-D, high definition sound” by providing the church with a redemptive framework and playbook for gospel love in action. I highly recommend this book for any Christian seeking to apply the radical, life-changing love of the gospel to the messy lives around them.

Ryan Townsend

Executive Director, 9Marks

This important book is a much-needed manual for equipping every Christian (not just pastors and professional counselors) to fulfill the call of Romans 15:14 to help one another to grow to become more like Jesus.

Mehl draws on a wealth of pastoral experience as he shows the reader how to use biblical principles to care for people in very realistic (and messy) life situations. As the title indicates, soul care is “messy.” There isn’t a ten-step formula which will solve every problem. Rather, we lovingly listen and then speak the truth to hurting people and then stand back and see the great things that God can do through his powerful Word.”

Jim Newheiser

Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology and the Director of the Christian Counseling Program, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

Executive Director, IBCD (The Institute for Biblical Counseling and Discipleship)

Author of *Money: Seeking God’s Kingdom; Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage*

Messiness is a common denominator in all of our lives. In *Loving Messy People*, Mehl leans in close in order to encourage us in gospel truth, pastorally confronting us with kindness and pointing to the hope of change found in the sure work of Jesus. Mehl seeks to remove our fears and hesitations to engage in the messy lives of others, knowing the goal is not to remain sanitary but to be sanctified as we serve Christ by serving others.

Dale Johnson

Executive Director, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors

Associate Professor of Biblical Counseling, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Scott Mehl has written a creative and easy-to-digest work that will help motivate and equip *all* believers in their God-given role of ministry to one another. He has gone into more detail than many biblical counseling resources on how anyone can apply scriptural principles in a relational model of “gospel care.” Scott’s chapter on love (and its overarching role in helping others) is one of the best I’ve read on the subject and is immensely practical. In addition, Scott consistently ties everyday ministry to Jesus, the gospel, and being conformed to his image. If you are looking for a helpful resource for where to begin in following Christ in your ministry to other believers who are struggling, you have found it.

Stuart Scott

Professor of Biblical Counseling, The Masters University
Author of *The Exemplary Husband* and *The Faithful Parent*

There is no more formidable tool in the hand of God than a broken person ministering the grace of Jesus Christ to another broken person over the long haul, yet we often shy away from such ministry because of laziness, selfishness, or fear. Enter Scott Mehl’s *Loving Messy People*, an immensely encouraging book full of scriptural insights examined in the context of real-life examples. These insights will give you a realistic picture of what you can expect to encounter in your relationships with other believers, a more hopeful vision of what church community can be like, and an uplifting perspective on how you can become a fully-engaged participant in this slow-motion miracle we call sanctification.

Milton Vincent

Pastor-Teacher, Cornerstone Fellowship Bible Church in
Riverside, CA
Author of *A Gospel Primer for Christians*

The Bible calls us to love one another as Christ has loved us—we messy sinners. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's all praise the Lord! Grace abounds. If we are going to be faithful disciples of the risen Christ, then we, too, must love the messy sinners in our lives. With real stories, pastoral wisdom, and piercing application of the gospel, Scott helps us see how the Good News gives us a framework and a fire in our bones to love one another like Christ loves us.

J.A. Medders

Pastor of Preaching and Theology, Redeemer Church in Tomball, TX
Author of *Humble Calvinism*

Loving others is a difficult but necessary pathway to our joy in Jesus. Situations are complex. People are not always receptive. We don't know what to say or if it will really help. Dr. Mehl teaches us to love by knowing, serving, speaking, and "gospelizing." As a pastor responsible for equipping my people to speak the truth in love to one another, this is now my go-to book recommendation. *Loving Messy People* simplifies love for others in complex situations so that you confidently do your part in helping them find true happiness in Jesus.

P. J. Tibayan

Member and Pastor-Theologian, Bethany Baptist Church in Bellflower, California

I am so thankful for the ministry of Scott Mehl. A faithful man, husband, father, and Christian. He is a reliable shepherd and a trustworthy voice.

Heath Lambert

Senior Pastor, First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, FL
Author of *Finally Free* and *A Theology of Biblical Counseling*

DEDICATION

To My Spiritual Family
Cornerstone Church of West L.A.

*Now concerning brotherly love you have no need
for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have
been taught by God to love one another, for that
indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers [and
sisters] throughout [Los Angeles]. But we urge you,
brothers [and sisters], to do this more and more.*

(1 Thessalonians 4:9-10)

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CALLED INTO THE *Mess*

Life is messy. Your life is messy. Your friends' lives are messy. Your small-group leader's life is messy. Your pastor's life is messy. Being messy is one of the hallmarks of being human. Every person you know has a messy life. And becoming a Christian doesn't change that.

The first time I realized this was in college. When God grabbed ahold of my life I quickly found myself surrounded by Christians. But these weren't the perfect Christians you see smiling on church websites. I was surrounded by people who believed firmly in the gospel and loved Jesus passionately, yet many of them were still hurting, struggling with sin, doubting, or confused. I was surrounded by messy people with messy lives. I didn't know exactly what they needed, and I didn't know what I had to offer. But I knew that God wanted me to play some part in their stories.

The first time I led a small group as a part of our local church something similar happened. I was excited about the potential of the young men I had invited. They had committed to study Scripture and live life together in a way they never had before. But as we dug into one another's lives it became obvious that many of these guys were also hurting, struggling with sin, doubting, or confused. I was again surrounded by messy people with messy lives. I didn't know exactly what they needed, and I didn't know what I had to offer. But again I knew that God wanted me to play some part in their stories.

I am sure you can imagine what happened when my wife and I moved to West Los Angeles to plant a church. God began drawing people to our young church, new believers coming to faith and established believers committing to reach our city. As

our core group formed and relationships deepened, I was able to see how each one of the members of our brand-new church was hurting, struggling with sin, doubting, or confused as well. I was *again* surrounded by messy people with messy lives. I didn't *know* exactly what they needed, and I wasn't sure what I had to offer. But *again*, I knew that God wanted me to play some part in their stories.

Even now, after pastoring that same church for over a decade, I think about the community group that meets at our house every Friday night. These are some of our closest friends. Our kids play sports together, we hang out late on our back patio together, and we share our lives with one another. And you know what? They're all pretty messy. Some of them are hurting, struggling with sin, doubting, or confused, too. And sometimes I'm still not exactly sure what they need, and sometimes I still wonder what I have to offer. But I *know* that God wants me to play some part in their stories.

My entire life I have been surrounded by messy people with messy lives. The only reason it doesn't bother me is because I'm messy, too. And not like drippy burrito messy, but more like swimming in salsa messy. I'm sure my friends look at me and wonder to themselves, "Why do I always end up around people like this?" Do you ever find yourself asking that question? Maybe you wonder, "Is there something wrong with me that I keep attracting people with messy lives?" Or you begin to strategize, "If I could just find some non-messy people to befriend, I might finally have some uncomplicated relationships!"

But it should be familiar to be around messy people. That's what the church is. I assume that's been your experience, too. Some people can trick you for a season, but I promise, they're just as messy as the rest of us. All Christians are. Eventually the depression, anxiety, chronic health issues, addictions, doubts, insecurities, pride, abuse, prejudice, or poverty will come to the surface. To know a person is to know their mess.

Maybe you have a friend who has confessed her struggle with eating to you. She desires to be disciplined and knows what she *should* do, but she just can't seem to resist her constant cravings. Maybe there's a younger man at church who has asked you for help because he's completely unmotivated at work and is afraid his poor performance is going to cost him his job. Maybe your

daughter is plagued by panic attacks or your son is beginning to wonder if God made a mistake creating him physically male. Whatever the stories are in your life, I'm sure you've wondered (possibly even in a panicked tone), "Oh man! What do I say? What do I do? Where do I turn?"

So, what *does* it look like to be a part of God's story written in the mess? How does God plan to address the hurt, sin, and confusion in the lives of your friends and family? What do you really have to offer those around you? How will God deal with all this mess?

Well, God deals with the mess using a beautiful amalgamation of means. God has dealt with the mess eternally by sending his Son to die on the cross and conquer sin and death. He has sent ongoing provision for the mess in the form of his Spirit. He has given us clear and sufficient truth in the midst of the mess through his Word. But the primary way God intends to deliver the message of his Son, as communicated in his Word and empowered by his Spirit, is you. *You* are God's provision. *You* are a central part of God's story of redemption and sanctification of those around you. Yes, you. Even with all your mess.

Your mess doesn't disqualify you from being used by God. In fact, it makes you even more qualified. God loves using messy people to minister to messy people. If he used clean and shiny people, they would receive all the glory. But God loves using people like you and me so that there is no doubt who gets credit for the work he does. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

This is the point Paul Tripp makes in his classic book *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*:

Many of us would be relieved if God had placed our sanctification in the hands of trained and paid professionals, but that simply is not the biblical model. God's plan is that through the faithful ministry of every part, the whole body will grow to full maturity in Christ. The leaders of his church have been gifted, positioned, and appointed to train and mobilize the people of God for this "every person, every day" ministry lifestyle.¹

Tripp's vocabulary is from Ephesians 4:11–16. The apostle Paul describes God's desire to use us in one another's mess. He combines the example of Christ, God's design of the church, and the work of the Holy Spirit to clearly describe God's call on each one of us to this lifestyle of personal ministry.

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

(Eph. 4:11–16)

Whatever the cause of the mess, God has a plan to help each one of us grow. And at the center of his plan he has placed you and me. I am called to speak the truth to you in the midst of your mess. You are called to speak the truth to me in the midst of my mess. This is not just the calling of pastors, missionaries, counselors, or Bible study leaders; if you are a Christian, this is your calling, too. God wants to use *you*, even in the midst of your mess, to speak loving truth into the lives of other messy people.

But for us to live out God's call to minister in the midst of the mess, both truth and love are necessary. Loving someone without truth is like being a bad Uber driver. It's like being a driver who is meticulous about the comfort of his passengers, but doesn't have any navigation skills or knowledge of the

city he's driving in. You make sure the temperature in the car is just right. You put on your passenger's favorite music. You provide them with a plethora of phone-charging cords, and offer gum or candy for the trip. But then you spend thirty minutes simply wandering around the streets of the city and end up dropping off your passenger miles from where they actually need to go.

Similarly, when we fall into the trap of loving others without speaking truth, we end up wandering aimlessly. This is what happens when we are kind, polite, caring, and compassionate, but fail to bring the truth of God and the gospel to bear when a person is struggling. The truth of God and the message of the gospel are the only things that can provide true hope, peace, joy, and transformation in the midst of our messes. To act lovingly toward someone but withhold what they desperately need isn't real love. We cannot build one another up through niceness or well wishes. We must love one another enough to courageously and wisely speak the truth.

On the other hand, speaking truth without love can also be compared to being a bad Uber driver, just in a different way. It's like being a driver who knows exactly where to go but has no interest in his passenger's safety or comfort. You pick up your passenger in your beat-up 1973 Ranchero that is filled to the roof with fast-food garbage so they have to sit in the open back with no seats and no seat belts. Your passenger hops in, only to find a coyote carcass and a month's supply of beer cans, while you take off racing down the street and squealing your tires around every turn. When you arrive at their destination you discover that your passenger hopped out miles ago at a stoplight because it was all too much. You may have arrived at the destination, but you failed to bring your passenger along with you.

This is what it's like when we throw our favorite Bible verses at people without considering whether they are actually what is most needed. Too many people have been convinced that biblical truth "doesn't work," not because there was a problem with the truth, but because the truth wasn't communicated with love. It may be true that "all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28), but is that verse what is most needed or the best application of love in every moment of every mess? Oftentimes not.

This also happens when we speak truth but don't demonstrate that truth through our sacrificial actions. Messy people need more than just truth spoken to them. They need it lived out for them. I think this is partially why the phrase translated "speaking the truth" in Ephesians 4:15 is actually only one word in the original language: "truthing." Paul's call is literally for us to be "truthing" one another in love. While this undeniably includes speaking the truth, it also involves much more.

As we'll see throughout this book, the call to "truth" one another in love is everywhere in Scripture, and it should be everywhere in our lives. No matter what the circumstances or cause of the mess, you and I have much to offer the messy people all around us.

COMFORTING IN THE MESS OF SUFFERING

Sometimes a person's mess comes from someone or somewhere else. We live in a horribly fallen world where our fallen friends and family, fallen coworkers and neighbors, fallen environment, fallen bodies, and fallen culture all compound to create quite a mess. We suffer every day under the effects of this fallenness, and so does everyone around us. This is why God calls us to comfort one another in the midst of the mess: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

God comforts us in our mess. As the psalmist wrote, "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life" (Ps. 119:50). Or as Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). But God's comfort, as beautiful and sustaining as it is, was never meant to find its end in you or me alone. God comforts us for a reason beyond our own contentment: so that we "may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction." God blesses us so that we may be a blessing.

This means that when those around you are suffering, it's not up to them to find comfort on their own. You and I are called to be God's agents of comfort to those around us. God has placed you in the lives of suffering people so that

they may be comforted by you with the same comfort you have been comforted with by God. “Truthing” in love means coming alongside those who are hurting and speaking the glorious, hope-giving, life-sustaining truth of God and the gospel. Whether they are suffering from abuse, sickness, discouragement, depression, homelessness, or discrimination, we are each called to deliver God’s hope to the hurting.

RESTORING IN THE MESS OF SIN

Sometimes a person’s mess comes from within. We are all sinners desperately in need of grace, and becoming a Christian doesn’t erase that need. Our hearts still chase after lesser loves and our flesh still cries out for selfish desires. And more often than any of us would care to admit, we give in. Our sin reveals itself in many different ways, from the obvious (porn, lying, drug abuse, etc.) to the more subtle (workaholism, quiet anger, escaping through entertainment, etc.). But just as God calls us to speak into one another’s suffering, he calls us to speak into one another’s sin as well: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” (Gal. 6:1).

You may read this and see the “out” you’ve been looking for when Paul writes that it is the “spiritual” who are called to restore their brother or sister. This is the responsibility of “spiritual” Christians, not “normal” Christians like you, right? Wrong. Just before this passage, at the end of Galatians 5, we find the list of the fruit of the Spirit. This is the fruit that is naturally being produced in the lives of *everyone* who has the Holy Spirit inside them. So, if you have the Holy Spirit living inside you, you are the “spiritual” Christian Paul is referring to. And it is *your* responsibility to restore *any* of your brothers or sisters who are caught in sin.

When those around you are caught in sin, it’s not up to them to find the way out on their own. You and I are called to be God’s agents of restoration in their lives. God has placed you in the lives of sinning people so that they may be restored to him through your gentle, careful, sacrificial love. “Truthing” in love means speaking the glorious, hope-giving, life-sustaining truth of God and the gospel to those who are caught in sin. Whether

their sin comes in the form of addiction, laziness, covetousness, murder, pride, or lust, we are each called to deliver God's restoration in the mess of sin.

WHAT'S GETTING IN THE WAY?

We are all called to minister to one another and build one another up. We are all called to care for one another in the mess of suffering. We are all called to restore one another in the mess of sin. But if the biblical call to minister to one another is so clear, what's holding us back? What keeps us from fully engaging in the lives of those around us in the way God has designed? Why do we all seem to find this kind of personal ministry so difficult?

There are probably messy people in your life right now who have come to mind as you've read this chapter. What is keeping you from comforting them in the midst of their suffering or restoring them in the midst of their sin? Of course, I can't answer these questions for you specifically. But I *can* identify a few of the barriers that I often hear, and briefly tell you how I hope this book will help.

BUSYNESS

We're all busy. There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and somehow we seem to spend every single one of them. Jerry Bridges lamented that "We are all so busy, absorbed in our own responsibilities and insulated from one another. We pass each other like ships in the night."² While I don't think this book will make you any less busy, my prayer is that it will help clarify what you ought to be busy doing. I don't want to simply add one more expectation to your plate, but instead help you see how much personal ministry you are already doing in the midst of your busy schedule, and empower you to be even more effective with the limited time that you have.

SELF-FOCUS

When I say that we are all called to comfort, restore, and minister to one another, I'm afraid that what you hear is "Someone should be comforting, restoring, and ministering to me!" I often hear people say something to the effect of, "That

sounds so great! I just wish someone would do that for me.” My hope is that this book will help you see how completely God *has* loved you and provided for you, and that it will encourage you to take your eyes off of yourself in order to see the opportunities to love others. We all know how we want to be loved; this book is about how we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves.

TRELLIS WORK

In their insightful book *The Trellis and the Vine*, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne divide the work we traditionally refer to as “ministry” into two categories: trellis work and vine work.³ Trellis work is the running of programs, serving on committees, and the maintaining of the institutional structure of the church. Vine work is the personal caring for and nurturing of souls. The goal of a trellis is to provide a structure upon which a vine can grow. The trellis is important, but only to the extent that it serves and facilitates the growth of the vine. What Ephesians 4 calls all of us to is vine work: the nurturing, comforting, and restoring of one another in love. Sometimes we can get distracted by all the important trellis work needed in the church and can view our planning of events, serving on committees, or setting up for a Sunday service as our contribution to the church. But, while trellis work has its place, we can’t miss the fact that every one of us is called to vine work as well. Vine work is what this book is designed to equip you for.

LACK OF EQUIPPING

A desire to be equipped may have been the reason you picked this book up in the first place. You may feel like you don’t know what to say, what to do, or where to start when it comes to the messes around you. You may feel that you don’t have enough knowledge of people or the Bible to really minister effectively in the midst of someone else’s mess. My hope is that this book will help in that department, but of course it won’t provide all the equipping you need. One of the best resources I can encourage you to turn to is your pastor. All the pastors I know would *love* for someone in their church to come to them and ask to learn more about how to help others. And if your pastor doesn’t know where to begin (or if you’re a pastor yourself), maybe reading through this book together would be a great place to start.

LACK OF CONFIDENCE

I am convinced that the single biggest hindrance to personal ministry in the church today is a lack of confidence—lack of confidence in the Word of God as sufficient for all of life; lack of confidence in the Spirit of God to actually change people; lack of confidence in our own Spirit-empowered ability to help people in the midst of their mess. More than anything else, my prayer is that this book will help address the lack of confidence that I know you feel. As we look at how Scripture gives us guidance for every aspect of our relationships, I pray that you will become more confident that the Word of God truly is sufficient for even the messiest situations you will ever face. As we meditate on the power of the gospel to truly transform people, I pray that you will become more confident in the work of the Spirit. And as we learn about the art of ministering to one another, I pray that you will become more confident in your own Spirit-empowered ability, and realize just how much faithful ministry you are already doing.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

The church where I am privileged to pastor is filled with people just like you who experience barriers just like yours. They're busy, they can be selfish, they get distracted by trellis work, they need to be equipped, and they lack confidence. Yet many of them have heard God's call to speak the truth in love to one another and are seeing God work in incredible ways in the midst of the mess. None of them are doing it perfectly, but that's the beauty of it. Just like you, they are just messy people surrounded by other messy people. God is working through them, and, sometimes, even in spite of them.

Amy is a work-at-home mom. Her life is packed with kids' needs and activities. Her husband is a huge blessing, but he works long hours. Amy is often on her own caring for their three kids as well as the occasional foster child. Amy's first passion is to disciple her children, but beyond that there are others in her life who look to her for help and guidance as well. Old acquaintances, moms in her community group, and other friends all have messy lives. Sometimes Amy doesn't know where to start, but she recognizes God's call for her to be a speaker of

truth in love. So she faithfully ministers to those around her, whether it's through a short conversation at the park or via text message.

Abe is a young single professional. There are innumerable opportunities in West LA for a young single person like him. Almost any lifestyle he would want is at his fingertips. Yet Abe has committed his life to serving and loving other people even while maintaining his professional career. Instead of spending his free time on himself, he often spends it serving and speaking the truth in love to his brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead of simply seeking to be entertained or distracted, he uses this season in his life as a unique opportunity to bless and love others.

Nancy is a trained therapist. She has enough training to open her own practice, but her real passion is simply to volunteer as a part of the church family. She loves to speak the truth in love to her brothers and sisters who find themselves in particularly messy situations. She has found her training helpful, but she knows that only the gospel can actually transform hearts. So she dedicates much of her free time and energy to ministering in the context of the local church.

Brian is a gifted preacher. His communication gifts have been affirmed ever since he was in college. He's the kind of pastor who could have settled into a role as a "teaching pastor" and spent the vast majority of his time studying, preaching, and simply interacting with church staff. But God's conviction on Brian's heart to truly shepherd people has led him to develop into a gifted discipler as well. He has become someone who speaks the truth in love privately as well as publicly, and who regularly serves those in his community as a fellow brother in Christ.

Jenni is a new believer. Well, she's not now, but she was when she began ministering to others. When the gospel grabbed ahold of Jenni's life, it wasn't long before God gave her opportunities to speak the beauty of that truth into others' lives as well. Early on in her walk with Christ, Jenni realized that the hope and truth she had been given were not just for her. God had redeemed her for a purpose, and even with her limited biblical knowledge she still had the opportunity (and responsibility) to bless others with whatever knowledge she had.

Dennis is a busy surgeon. His two kids, introverted personality, and demanding work schedule provide all the excuses in the world for him to cut a check to the church, attend on Sundays, and consider his service to the church complete. But Dennis recognizes God's call on his life to be an integral part of the church family. This is why he opens up his home regularly to lead a community group and shares his life with other men so that he might disciple and counsel them faithfully (even if he might not use those words).

Abby recently graduated high school and is settling into her new life as a college student. Her friends have all kinds of different issues, from struggles with their parents, to academic pressure, to the many different social temptations that come with newfound freedom. Abby's experiencing some of these same struggles too, but even in the midst of her own mess it is obvious that God wants to use her in the lives of her friends and classmates. So she seeks to regularly be the listening ear and trusted confidant her friends need, and to do what she can to point them to the life-giving truth of the gospel.

What about you? What life stage are you in? What is your role? What story could be written about you? Wherever you are, God has laid before you an opportunity. More accurately, he has laid before you a responsibility. Whether you are a brand-new Christian or have been a Christian for half a century; whether you're the pastor of a small church in the city, a large church in the country, or a mega-church in the suburbs; whether you're a farmer, civil engineer, librarian, or a health inspector; whether you're a student or a professor: God has called you to speak the truth in love to those around you. You are an integral part of his plan to grow and mature the other Christians around you. You are called to minister in the midst of the mess. You are called to gospel care.

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, xi.
2. Jerry Bridges, *Crisis in Caring*, 9.
3. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*.

George and Naomi sat down in our family room with one goal in mind: they wanted me to fix their marriage. Their marriage had become a pretty significant mess and they didn't know what to do about it. George wasn't a Christian and had resisted the idea of talking to anyone about their marriage. He figured that their marriage was their business and didn't see the need to talk about it with anyone else. However, Naomi had finally had enough. She couldn't keep living the way they were living and insisted that the two of them meet with somebody, *anybody*, and the lucky "somebody" was me. When they sat down, it was obvious that I was going to need to earn George's trust. He wasn't ready to hear anything from anyone, especially a pastor, but he was at least willing to be there. On the face of it, it seemed obvious that he was the one who was going to require the most engagement, but things aren't always what they seem.

We spent the majority of our first few times together getting to know one another. I asked a lot of questions and shared a bit about some of the similar struggles I'd had in my own marriage. The guidance I gave them at first wasn't anything special, but just some commonsense relational tips. I encouraged them to set aside time each day to talk intentionally with one another. I had them identify some specific ways they could show their love for one another. And I had them begin to share a calendar in order to minimize their miscommunications in scheduling.

After a couple weeks of applying these simple tasks, their relationship began to change. Their fights weren't as frequent

and their schedules weren't as chaotic. I could see that I was earning George's trust. We were making progress toward their goal and they were enjoying the results. It was becoming obvious, however, that it was time to convey to both George and Naomi that the problem with their marriage wasn't just that they didn't have the right solutions, but that they were also working toward the wrong goal.

I told George and Naomi how encouraged I was by the diminishing friction in their marriage, and how glad I was that the tips I had given them were helpful. But then I told them that if they actually wanted to fix what was most fundamentally wrong with their marriage, they were going to need more than tips. The truth was, the problems they were experiencing went far deeper than communication and scheduling. If they were truly going to address the root of their problems, we needed to talk about their hearts. When I finished explaining this to them, George looked at me for a second and, to my surprise, simply said, "OK. What's wrong with my heart?"

George's response startled me for a second. I'm not sure I had ever had someone who wasn't a Christian open the door so widely. So I proceeded to explain to him that God's goal for his marriage (and his life) wasn't just that he would have a good marriage, but that he would become more like Christ. And I explained that the only way that was possible was through faith in the grace and forgiveness offered through the gospel. George quickly latched on and wanted to know more. But, to my surprise, it was Naomi who turned out to be more hesitant.

Naomi liked the idea of George coming to faith and becoming more like Jesus, but she was resistant to the idea that God's goal in this trial was to make *her* more like Christ as well. It seemed clear to Naomi that the mess they were in was George's mess, not hers. After all, George was the non-Christian in the relationship, so the problem was with him, right? Slowly Naomi came to realize that it wasn't only George who had been aiming at the wrong target in their marriage; she had been, too. She had brought George to me looking for a biblical solution to their problems, but she soon realized that they didn't just need a more biblical solution; they needed a more biblical goal.

THE GOAL

Before we can identify the way forward in helping people in their messes, we need to first make sure that we have the right tools and that we're headed in the right direction. Things can get confusing in the midst of the mess. Stepping into someone's mess can be like having a huge wave crash right on top of you while swimming in the ocean. You can end up underwater, disoriented and confused, and not knowing which way is up (surfers call this being in the washing machine). But before you start swimming, searching for air, you need to make sure you're headed in the right direction. Otherwise, you may expend a ton of time and energy only to realize that you've gotten further from the air your body is desperately craving.

Almost every system to deal with people's messes caters to self-defined goals. Whether you want to be happier, calmer, more productive, more disciplined, or less stressed, there are countless self-help resources and professionals with the express purpose of helping you change in the exact ways you desire. We define our own messes, and so we also define our own goals of change.

However, if we are going to follow God's call to speak the truth in love to one another, we must first clarify what the goal of that love-filled truth is. More specifically, we must make sure that *our* goal is in line with *God's* goal. Thankfully, God has communicated his goal for our ministry clearly and repeatedly in Scripture.

God's will for our lives as Christians is no secret. His goal for us is not simply that we would have better marriages, be less anxious, be happier, or feel fulfilled (although those are all natural byproducts of his goal). God's goal for us is that we would become more like Christ. Having reconciled us to himself through Christ, God is in the process of transforming us more and more into his image. As Scripture communicates so clearly:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification . . .
(1 Thess. 4:3)

*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ
Jesus for good works, which God prepared
beforehand, that we should walk in them.*
(Eph. 2:10)

Consequently, God's goal for our ministry to one another must be to help one another become more like Christ too. There are all sorts of different goals we could pursue, but only helping one another grow closer to Christ and become more like him can accurately be described as "truthing in love."

When God's goal becomes our goal, we won't be encouraging others to pursue their own passions and desires. We won't be trying to help people identify and achieve their self-focused dreams. Instead, we will be reminding them of the truth, implications, and expectations of the gospel. We'll be reminding them that "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). We'll be reminding them what God has designed them for, and what he has promised to produce in them. His Spirit dwells in every Christian and naturally produces Christlikeness in the midst of every one of our messes: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law" (Gal. 5:22-23).

Interestingly, if you listen to the mess of any Christian's heart, the opposite of that struggle is inevitably described here in this list. This is what it means to say that Scripture truly is sufficient for all of life. The sanctifying work of the Spirit addresses every aspect of the mess we experience. But when we define our own goals, we find that, while they are similar, those goals simply don't go deep enough.

In the midst of marital strife we want to get our own way, but God wants to produce love, peace, and faithfulness. In the midst of depression we want happiness, but God wants to give us lasting joy. In the midst of anger we want to be able to stay calm, but God wants to produce true peace and gentleness. In the midst of overeating we want to lose a few pounds, but God wants us to develop true self-control in all areas of our lives.

God wants to go deeper. He is after our hearts. He wants us to be like him. This is what he created us for, and what he *re-created* us for. Our goal in personal ministry must be his goal. Many of us have seen that embarrassing moment when a young basketball player gets ahold of the ball, takes off on a fast break, and finishes with a perfect layup, only to quickly realize that he has gotten turned around and scored on his opponent's hoop. His intention was sincere, his effort was strenuous, and his

execution flawless; the only problem was, he had his sights set on the wrong goal. The wrong goal changes everything, and this is never more true than when it comes to helping others in the midst of their messes. The goal of all biblical personal ministry is to help one another become more like Jesus.

This is why the messy people in our lives need more than just our attention; they need the gospel. Whether they've been a Christian for days (like George) or decades (like Naomi), there is no truth they need more than the gospel. We're going to cover the gospel more thoroughly in chapters 11 to 14, but let's just look briefly at why the gospel is so central to achieving God's goal for our ministry to one another.

THE GOSPEL

When we're aiming at our own goals, we tend to use our own means. Without an external authority, we default to using whatever it seems "works" best. This is how everything from a conversation with a friend to a session with a therapist to a psychiatric medication is evaluated. Did it "work"? Of course, what we mean by "work" is, "Did it help achieve the goal I have set for myself to be happier/less anxious/more productive etc.?" Unfortunately there is no conversation, no professional, and no pill that alone can make you more like Christ. If we are going to aim for a biblical goal, we need biblical means.

The chief provision God has made for our sanctification (the process of becoming more like Jesus) is the gospel. When I say "the gospel," what I mean is both the message of the gospel and the implications of the gospel. The message of the gospel, which is applied to us through faith in Christ, is summed up in 1 Peter 3:18: "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit."

However, being reconciled to God is not the only blessing that we receive through faith in Christ. The New Testament lists numerous implications of the gospel that are also given to us and ought to be considered part of the "good news" contained in "the gospel." In Christ we are also adopted (Eph. 1:4), born again (1 Peter 1:3), guarded (1 Peter 1:5), forgiven (1 John 2:12), made heirs (Rom. 8:17), set free (Rom. 8:2), and so much more!

If we are going to help others become more like Christ, we have to start by calling them back, again and again, to the truth of the gospel. We have to encourage their Spirit-empowered effort to be motivated by God's love and grace. As Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dennis Johnson put it so beautifully, "Sanctification is never advanced by self-focused grief or guilt. It is energized by joy and driven by love. . . . Only a remembrance of the gospel will free us from our habitual grief and guilt. Only the gospel can implant the joy and love in our hearts that will free, motivate, and inspire us."¹

When we call one another back to the truth of the gospel, we throw fuel on each other's love for God. This love for God is then put into practice through the hard work of bringing our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors more and more into conformity with Christ. The entire New Testament is filled with reminders of the truth of the gospel preceding practical instructions (for example, Eph. 1–3 vs. 4–6; Rom. 1–11 vs. 12–16; Col. 1–2 vs. 3–4). Paul even provides a condensed version of this in his letter to Titus:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

(Titus 3:4–8)

Paul begins by renewing the reader's mind with gospel truth. God saved us. He didn't save us because of our own righteous works, but "according to his own mercy." He saved us through his own "goodness and loving kindness." He sent his Son to pay the penalty we deserve for our sin and invites us into his family

through faith. What life-altering truth! It doesn't matter how long we've been Christians, we all need to be reminded of the gospel daily.

Notice, though, that Paul doesn't simply state the fact of the gospel, he also renews the reader's mind with gospel implications. As glorious as our salvation is, God has done so much more through the gospel than simply save us. In this passage, Paul reminds Titus that God also regenerates us and makes us alive. He renews us by the power of his Holy Spirit. That same Spirit is also poured out on us so that we might possess his power. He has justified us by the blood of Christ. And he has made us his children and therefore heirs of the entire universe. When we are reminded of these kinds of gospel implications, it changes everything (as we will look at more deeply in chapter 13).

But Paul's reminder of both the message and the implications of the gospel has a goal in mind. There's a reason he wants Titus to "insist" on these truths. The reason is: "so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works." In addition to reminding others of gospel truth and gospel implications, we must also remind them of gospel expectations. God expects the gospel to change our lives in tangible ways (as we will look at more deeply in chapter 14). The natural byproduct of the gospel taking root and growing in our hearts is our lives becoming shaped into the image Christ. Therefore, if the goal of our ministry is to help one another become more like Christ, we must recognize the central role the gospel plays in that process.

THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE

If you've read this far, I'm assuming that you are—at least in some way—compelled by the authority of Scripture. Every point that has been made has been rooted in the authority of God as he has revealed himself in his Word. It is through Scripture that God calls us to speak the truth to one another (Eph. 4:15). It is through Scripture that God communicates to us the goal of our lives and ministries: becoming more like Christ (1 Thess. 4:3). It is through Scripture that God specifies what becoming more like Christ looks like (Gal. 5:22–24). It is through Scripture that

God delivers the message of the gospel that empowers this transformation (Titus 3:4-7).

I've found that most Christians struggle less with the authority of Scripture than they do with the sufficiency of Scripture. You may agree that Scripture is authoritative for everything it speaks about. But you may still be confused about what exactly it addresses and what it doesn't. There are excellent books that have shown how Scripture is sufficient for every struggle in life,² and countless resources on specific struggles that practically demonstrate Scripture's sufficiency.³ But that is not my goal here. As you read *this* book, my hope is that you will become convinced of how completely sufficient Scripture is for showing us *how* to speak the truth in love to one another. Scripture teaches us, with beautiful comprehensiveness, how to be a friend, mentor, counselor, or disciple in the midst of one another's messes.

While that may all sound good, the problem is that many of us still feel like we don't know what to do. Whether it's Amy, Abe, Nancy, Brian, Jenni, Dennis, or Abby, a common theme runs through the lives of many of the people I see wanting to minister to those around them: they are convinced that they are called to speak the truth in love, they know a certain amount of biblical truth, they may even have read some Christian books or articles on related topics, but they still aren't sure what to actually *do*. Where do they start? What should they say? What should they *not* say? How should they use Scripture? When should they use Scripture? How do they apply the gospel? How do they go deeper than just surface-level change? Where do they turn when they feel in over their heads?

Thankfully, God has not left us on our own to answer these questions. Not only does Scripture sufficiently provide us with the goal of our ministry and the gospel to empower it, but it also provides us with the tools and guidance to get there. Scripture not only tells us that we are called to speak the truth in love, but *how* to speak it as well. In his Word, God not only gives us a calling, he also gives us a plan for fulfilling that calling. The rest of this book is dedicated to exploring and unpacking that plan.

THE PLAN

So how do we minister to one another? What's the plan? Throughout the New Testament, God gives us dozens of one-another commands that together define for us what the plan of personal ministry entails. We often view all of these one-anothers separately, but, when we put them together, they provide us with a holistic approach to personal ministry that towers over all other models in its usefulness, completeness, and beauty. No model for relationships (social or therapeutic) comes close to the description of Christian friendships and personal ministry we find in Scripture.

For the sake of this book, we are going to call these relationships of speaking the truth in love “gospel care.” Gospel care is the art of loving another person in order to help them become more like Jesus. Or, more specifically:

Gospel care is the God-exalting, grace-saturated art of loving another person, through patiently knowing, sacrificially serving, truthfully speaking, and consistently applying the gospel in order to help them become more like Jesus.

This, in summary, is the plan. This is how God desires to use us in the lives of others *to help them become more like Jesus*. And this plan breaks down into four summary categories that we are going to explore together.

Patiently knowing is a prerequisite to any word or action. There is no way you can minister effectively to someone without first knowing and understanding them deeply. We have all been the recipients of service and speech without knowledge, and it is discouraging at best and hurtful at worst. In order to lovingly minister to someone, we must first listen and seek to understand who they are and what they are experiencing, so that we can wisely determine what is most needed in any given moment.

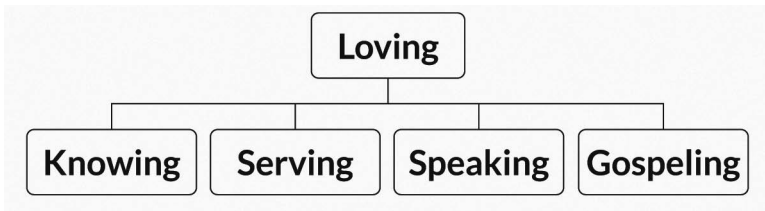
Sacrificially serving is a part of gospel care that has gone out of vogue. When we think of personal ministry we tend to think of simply sitting and talking, yet the New Testament has no category for such one-dimensional ministry. The numerous service-oriented one-another commands in Scripture and our own personal experience both attest to the power of sacrificial service in ministering in the midst of the mess. We are called to be more than just the lips of Christ to those who are hurting and struggling; we are called to be his hands and feet as well.

Truthfully speaking is also an integral part of gospel care. While consistently applying the gospel is, undeniably, a spoken aspect of ministry, there are numerous other kinds of speech that are needed in relationships as well. As biblical friends, counselors, and disciples, we must be hope-givers, affirmers, and confronters. We must speak truth into diverse situations in diverse ways.

Consistently applying the gospel (or “gospel,” as I like to call it) is the core of gospel care. While there is a great amount of good that can come from patiently knowing someone, sacrificially serving them, and speaking truth to them, the only hope for true transformation is to help them apply the gospel to whatever situation they find themselves in. We apply the gospel by helping them to see that their problems are worse than they realize, but that God’s grace is also greater than they’ve ever imagined, and that in light of this grace they can live a life of repentance more radical than they ever thought possible.



But gospel care is more than simply knowing, serving, speaking, and “gospel” others. In fact, each of these is actually an application of a deeper motivation that is central to all personal ministry. As the definition begins, “Gospel care is the God-exalting, grace-saturated art of *loving* another person.” Gospel care is essentially a manifestation of love above everything else. In fact, without love, none of these activities could accurately be called biblical in any real sense.



The love that motivates gospel care is a love that glorifies God as its source and motivation. The love expressed in gospel care points directly to the mercy of Christ and the magnitude of his grace. When you minister to someone, you do so as one messy person helping another messy person. As a fellow messy person, it is only natural that your love would be saturated by that same grace. The kingdom of God doesn't have any clean people available to minister to all the messy people who need help. Messy people like you and me are all God has at his disposal. And he loves to use messy people like us to befriend, counsel, and disciple other messy people.

So how do we do that? Well, as I've said, that's what we're going to explore together in the coming chapters, but in short, you befriend, counsel, and disciple other people simply by loving them. And you manifest that love by knowing them, serving them, speaking to them, and "gospeling" them. That's the plan.

But before we dig into the application of the plan, there's one more dynamic of gospel care we need to take a look at. You see, most of us, if we're honest, are pretty intimidated by other people's messes. We don't want some vague guidelines—we want a script. When we ask the question "How do we minister to one another?" we're looking less for general principles and more for specific verses, questions, or lines we can use. The problem is, as we'll see in the next chapter, gospel care is less of a science than an art. And to fulfill our calling to minister to those around us, we must embrace the artistic nature of our ministry.

So, are you ready? Maybe you've never tried your hand at this type of ministry before. Maybe you've been ministering to others for years, but you still feel like you have a lot of questions and insecurities. Maybe you've tried ministering to someone else a few times and feel way in over your head. No matter where you are, let me simply remind you that this is God's call on your life. He has placed you in the location you're in, with

the relationships you have and the wisdom you possess, for a purpose. God wants to use you. The next step is simply to take a deeper look at his plan for how.

ENDNOTES

1. Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dennis Johnson, *Counsel from the Cross*, 118.
2. Examples include Tim Lane and Paul Tripp, *How People Change*; Elyse Fitzpatrick and Dennis Johnson, *Counsel from the Cross*; Heath Lambert and Stuart Scott, *Counseling the Hard Cases*.
3. I can't provide a complete list here, but, just to give you an idea, there are many biblical resources available that demonstrate Scripture's sufficiency in addressing issues like sexual struggles (Heath Lambert, *Finally Free*; Bobby Scott, *Secret Sex Wars*); addictions (Ed Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave*); depression (Robert Somerville, *If I'm a Christian Why Am I Depressed?*); homosexuality (Jackie Hill Perry, *Gay Girl, Good God*; Caleb Kaltenbach, *Messy Grace*); domestic violence (Justin and Lindsey Holcomb, *Is It My Fault?*)—and the list could go on and on.

THE UNSCRIPTED ART OF GOSPEL CARE

Ben and Lucy had some pretty typical struggles in their marriage. Lucy couldn't decide whether to keep her part-time job and the income it provided, or to stay at home with their young son. Her emotions swung back and forth between feelings of guilt for not being at home and feelings of weakness for not being able to handle her job. She would talk and talk about her feelings, but rarely end up any closer to a real decision. Ben is an engineer in both career and disposition. He couldn't understand why his wife was so emotional about every little thing in their lives, and all he wanted was for her to make a choice. By the time I sat down with them, he didn't even care which choice she made. He just wanted it to be done so they could move on.

As I sat in their family room one evening, their son having already gone to sleep, I noticed just how far the two of them had drifted apart. They sat on the same couch somehow having transformed from partners into adversaries. It seemed as though neither of them could step outside of their own perspective long enough to communicate clearly with one another, and even though this moment didn't have to be a crisis in their marriage, it had become one.

I've sat with countless couples in similar situations. But as I looked into the eyes of these two hurting people, I realized that I didn't have a textbook answer to give them. I didn't have five steps to a wonderful marriage or a handbook to clear communication. I didn't even have one surefire Bible verse to set them on the path to marital bliss.