

“John Leonard’s *Get Real: Sharing Your Everyday Faith, Every Day* is a delightful read from a man who obviously delights in the gospel, loves people from all backgrounds, and rejoices in creatively and compassionately sharing the good news of grace in Christ Jesus as ‘normally’ as sharing a cup of coffee with a friend. Better yet, he teaches us how to do the same.”

Bryan Chapell, Pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church, Illinois; author of *Christ-Centered Preaching*

“Do you know why ‘party evangelism’ is more biblical than ‘friendship evangelism’? Do you know why (and how) to ‘evangelize Christians and disciple non-Christians’? Would you like a book about evangelism that is both solidly scriptural and thoroughly practical—and absolutely enjoyable to read? Then *Get Real* by John Leonard is the book for you. No question, this is one of the best books ever on evangelism.”

Dr. Samuel Logan, International Director, The World Reformed Fellowship

“When is the last time you talked to someone about Jesus? What comes to mind as you think about that question? Guilt? Frustration? Read John Leonard’s *Get Real* to encourage you to think differently about the people and opportunities Jesus brings into your life. Hear great stories from John’s experience reaching out to Muslims in France and as a church planter in Philadelphia. Read this book if you want to fall in love with the grace and power of the gospel all over again.”

Dr. Tim Witmer, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia; author of *The Shepherd Leader*

“It’s always puzzled me how Christians who believe totally in the true humanity of Jesus should use such dehumanized methods to introduce him to others. Thankfully, Leonard has written this excellent book that takes the real Jesus as guide and example to liberate us from all those techniques, and to excite and motivate us to be truly ‘personal’ in our evangelism. Every evangelist—every Christian—needs to read it.”

Dr. John D. Nicholls, Former Chief Executive and Director of Training, London City Mission

“This is simply *the* best book on personal outreach I have ever seen. John Leonard has written for the evangelistically ungifted. Especially beginning in chapter 4, I sensed, ‘This material is going to change me.’ And it has.”

Steven Estes, Pastor; co-author of *When God Weeps*

“This is a disturbing book. In all the right ways. John Leonard brings his considerable wealth of personal experience, cultural awareness, and biblical savvy to this eminently practical guide. Evangelism in Leonard’s approach is less daunting, less frightening, and less awkward than it needs to be. What is disturbing is that we can no longer hide behind either bombastic boilerplates or

timid excuses. What is comforting is that it allows Christ to do all the heavy lifting. If you are looking for the best resource for training in outreach, both personal and corporate, look no further.”

William Edgar, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia; author of *Truth in All Its Glory*

“If evangelism seems difficult, or if you have ever said, ‘I don’t have the gift of evangelism,’ you will wish you had read this book a long time ago. The *Get Real* paradigm is anchored in the Scriptures, and especially in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s own process of evangelism. *Get Real* explains in easy-to-understand-and-apply ways that evangelism can be a natural part of a Christian’s daily routine. *Get Real* is the material we use to train our missionaries at Mission to the World, and it is appreciated by the missionaries because it works.”

Paul Kooistra, Coordinator, Mission to the World

“If you have one book on evangelism in your library, it should be this one. It’s not what you expect. It’s about life, relationships, and godly inefficiency—and it’s about a God who loves us so much that it shows. This is “real deal” evangelism that breaks the rules and opens a floodgate of love and mercy to a desperate and needy world. Reading Dr. Leonard’s book is like a drink of cold, clear water refreshing a thirsty soul . . . ours and theirs.”

Steve Brown, Key Life radio program Bible teacher; professor, Reformed Seminary; author of *Three Free Sins: God’s Not Mad at You*.

“John is a gifted evangelist, which could be intimidating as we watch him in action, but, somehow, he immediately inspired me. As I was reading I got excited about all kinds of conversations up ahead. Being real, listening, and always looking for opportunities for a party—I can do that.”

Edward T. Welch, PhD, CCEF Faculty; psychologist; best-selling author

“Like most in the church, I believe in evangelism but am honestly reserved about (afraid of?) practicing it with strangers. (Does teaching and caring for a Sunday school class weekly count as evangelism? I sure hope so!) John Leonard passionately believes in, practices, and teaches many creative ways of doing evangelism. If the world is as desperately in need as our Scripture instructs us it is, then John Leonard’s challenging book can teach us bravery. Taste and see!”

Fredrick Dale Bruner, Professor Emeritus, Whitworth University; author of commentaries on Matthew, John, and the Holy Spirit in Acts

“Grace-driven evangelism as a lifestyle versus guilt-driven evangelism as a structured event. John Leonard helps us understand how to be ‘real’ and ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ in sharing the grace and gospel of Christ with others. Jesus loved people and openly shared his life with them as he met them in everyday life. We should do the same, and this book will help you do so more naturally and effectively.”

Robert C. (Ric) Cannada Jr., Chancellor Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

Get Real

SHARING YOUR EVERYDAY FAITH
EVERY DAY

JOHN S. LEONARD



www.newgrowthpress.com

Contents

Acknowledgments / vii

The Gospel We Share / 1

1: Two Ways to Witness	3
2: Grace from Beginning to End	9
3: Luke 7: Christ's Method, Our Model.....	23

A Real Approach to Sharing the Gospel / 39

4: For Christ's Sake, Be Normal	41
5: Party Evangelism.....	51
6: Be More Than a Friend	65
7: Evangelize Christians and Disciple Non-Christians.....	73
8: Let Christ Lead People to You.....	87
9: Listen More Than You Speak	97
10: Sow Widely	107

v

11: A Different Kind of Testimony 117

12: A Custom-Fit Suit 125

13: Evangelism Is Apologetics 137

14: Pray with Your Eyes Open 145

15: Raise Curiosity 153

16: Asking Others for Help 159

17: Sharing with People of Other Faiths 165

Conclusion

The Gospel: Too Good to Be True 177

The Gospel We Share



1

Two Ways to Witness

“Hi, my name is Bill. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?” Without waiting for me to reply, he continued—violating my personal space in an aggressive stance that made me feel threatened. Bill jumped right into his presentation of the gospel. It was one that I knew well.

Bill and his team had come to help us with an outreach, and I had come down early to the auditorium to help set up. Bill had not asked me my name, and in fact didn’t seem to want to know anything about me. He just cornered me and “shared.” The more he spoke, the more perturbed I became. I felt insulted by the impersonal and dehumanizing way I had been approached. And since Bill had assumed I wasn’t a Christian, I decided I would play along, giving him arguments for every point he was trying to make. The more unraveled and frustrated Bill became, the more I enjoyed our conversation.

The sales pitch ended quickly when a mutual friend came up to us and said, “John, I see you’ve met Bill. Bill, this is John; he is part of our local team and is here to help us with the outreach.” Bill’s mouth

dropped open, looking confused. He stammered, “But . . . are you . . . ? I don’t understand. Your answers weren’t . . .”

The outreach event went off without a hitch . . . so to speak. It was the typical Christian evangelistic meeting. A room full of Christians filled in as props, listening to other Christians tell them about the gospel, while everyone hoped someone in the room would be saved. But no one came forward when the invitation was given, and given, and given.

After the meeting, Bill came over, looking at me judgmentally. He said, “I still think there is something not quite right.” Funny, I was feeling exactly the same way about Bill—but for completely opposite reasons!



Fred rolled into the cafeteria on his three-wheeled scooter. He paused a distance from the table where my wife and I were eating lunch and asked, “May I join you?”

“Sure!” we responded. Everything about Fred communicated safety and acceptance. He was the most nonthreatening person I believe I have ever met.

At the time I was living in the inner city of Detroit with my wife Christy and our two small girls, doing cross-cultural training during the summer, in preparation to go to the mission field that fall. It had been a long, pressure-filled couple of months in the city. We couldn’t understand what living in the inner city of Detroit would teach us about life in the south of France, the mission field where we were headed.

I can’t tell you anything about Fred, as he never spoke about himself; his only interest was in us. He began asking questions as we shared our lunch together. His questions weren’t prying, inappropriate, or just making chit-chat, but invited us into a conversation. Fred was genuinely interested in us. You could see it in his eyes, the tone of his voice, and his body language. He wanted to know us—and we wanted to be known by him!

I can't explain what happened, but as we spoke together, a healing came over us. It felt as if warm oil was being poured over our heads. We could feel it going through our bodies, deep down into our bones, lifting the weight and pressure off of our shoulders, bringing calm over us.

I don't often think of the first encounter with Bill. In fact, I hope I never see Bill again. But Fred, yes—I would love to meet him again.

One reason that we're so reluctant to evangelize is because we believe that evangelism is doing what Bill did—imposing ourselves on others and leaving people cowering, feeling unimportant, used, and violated. We equate evangelism with selling. We see ourselves like those annoying phone solicitors who always seem to call us when we're sitting down to dinner! For this reason many of us run from anything that resembles evangelism. To have the gift of evangelism, it seems, you either need to have the personality of a used-car salesman or the capability to lead someone to Christ while in the 10-items-or-less lane at your local supermarket. If this is what you believe evangelism requires, I can't blame you for not wanting to evangelize.

As Christians, we know we should share our faith with others. However, we don't do it until we feel horribly guilty—then we force ourselves upon some poor, unsuspecting soul. We share the gospel the way they feed geese in France to make *foie gras*. They shove a funnel down a goose's throat and pour in the grain. Likewise, by force-feeding the gospel to others, the outcome of our "sharing" is that our guilt is assuaged. Who cares about the results? We didn't really expect anyone's life to be changed anyway.

The sad reality is that if you've ever watched a movie with caricatures of Christians, the truth is worse than fiction. Evangelism shouldn't be this way.

Evangelism doesn't have to be like my encounter with Bill; it can and should be like the time I spent with Fred. That kind of interaction leaves a deep personal impact. And yet the last word that would come to mind when you consider our interaction with Fred is "evangelism."

We would call what Fred does “counseling.” But it has everything to do with evangelism because we were made by God to have deep relationships with him and with others.

Sharing your faith doesn’t impose itself on others, leaving them feeling resentful and used. It invites people to step beyond a superficial friendship where no one really cares about listening, and to head toward deep spiritual relationship. It’s an approach that makes it safe for people to confide in you and trust you with the truth of what’s going on in their lives, so that your interaction with them becomes like warm oil, bringing healing, peace, and grace, lifting the burdens off their shoulders.

A real approach is not a presentation that you memorize, because the gospel you share is shaped by the person the Lord has brought into your life. It is molded by that person’s particular circumstances, problems, and struggles. In this approach to evangelism, the gospel is not a one-size-fits-all spandex sweatsuit; it is tailor-made, fitting only one person—the one standing in front of you.

Just because there isn’t an outline to memorize doesn’t mean this way of sharing your faith is easy. It requires you to have a wide and growing knowledge of the Bible and of our Lord’s teachings. One of the best ways to prepare to share your faith is to take notes in Bible study and church—not just to read the Bible, but to study it and absorb it. Read widely so you can be like the scribes of the kingdom our Lord speaks about when he says, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matthew 13:52).

At the same time, don’t be intimidated if you’re a new Christian. New Christians can make the best evangelists. Don’t believe for one moment that you don’t know enough. You’re looking for the people God is leading to himself through you. Therefore, God is going to use you in their lives because you have unique insights and experiences into the gospel that perfectly fit the people you’re sharing your faith with.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part is a look at the gospel from Scripture. My prayer is that you will fall in love again in the retelling of the story of the grace of God that is yours in Christ.

Once, when my wife and I were in a difficult place in our marriage, another couple invited us to dinner, unaware of what was going on in our lives. They asked us to share the story of how we met and fell in love. As we retold the story my wife and I fell in love all over again. I hope that you too will fall in love again with the gospel as the story is retold.

The second part of this book is about the way you set the gospel free in your life, so that your interactions with people become sources of grace and healing. Most of the ways we do this are counterintuitive to conventional wisdom.

This book is about grace, not guilt. This book does not guilt you into sharing your faith because you can't share grace if you're under guilt. It's about setting you free so that you'll be able, by God's grace, to impact those around you for Christ.



2

Grace from Beginning to End

I am fascinated by flight, particularly by man's first attempts to get off the ground. I love watching old footage of the things people invented, hoping the contraptions would fly. Perhaps you've seen some of these old films too. For example, there is the "part plane/part umbrella" that begins rattling and shaking on the runway, bouncing off the ground, and then all of a sudden the umbrella breaks in half and falls to the ground. Or the plane that has four layers of wings: as it accelerates, attempting to take off, the wings collapse and the experiment is over.

The most ridiculous footage I know of features a man who has strapped on wooden wings and a tail, and is now standing on a cliff. He begins to flap his wings, and then he jumps off the cliff. The next picture you see is the wooden wings and tail lying on the rocks below. It must be staged because who would do something so stupid? Why would you begin on a *cliff*? If I were him, I would have started on a tree stump. If that didn't work, then I would have tried the front porch, then the barn loft, and maybe the roof. If none of those worked, I would have given up (or broken something) before I

ever got to the cliff. Maybe that's exactly what our barnstormer did. If so, he must have convinced himself that if he only had more time and a greater distance from the ground, he could fly. He just needed to try harder.

Our inventor's unrelenting attitude is not that unusual; it isn't stupidity, but stubbornness. The attitude is not "I can do it" but "I *will* do it." We apply this attitude to everything—particularly our relationship with God.

Everyone, in their heart of hearts, believes that if they just have enough time and try hard enough, they can get their relationship with God right. Because this belief is embedded within us, the most difficult part of the gospel for us to accept is grace. Even those of us who say we live by grace look more like the man with the wooden wings and tail and his let's-try-harder mentality.

The person in Scripture who epitomizes the let's-try-harder approach to God is the rich man in Luke 18, who came to Jesus and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (v. 18). The rich man's words confirm what we all know instinctively—something is wrong; something is missing in our lives. The rich man expresses this problem correctly as spiritual in nature. We all desire to know God and to have eternal life, even if we express that need in a nonreligious way.

However, even though the rich man rightly diagnoses his condition, he seeks the wrong cure. He believes that *he* can do it. He asks, "What must *I* do to inherit eternal life?" In these words we see the universal desire for the restoration of our relationship with our Creator, but also the universal belief that if this relationship is going to be restored, it all depends on us. "What must I do, Jesus? Certainly there must be something that I must do, or become, so that God will accept me. Could you please tell me what that *is*?"

This is what makes grace so difficult to accept. We are confident that we have to do it, and in fact would *rather* do it ourselves. It's as if we're saying to God, "I don't need any grace; I can do it. Just tell

me what I need to do.” Even if we believe we’re saved by grace, so ingrained is the idea that “I must do it” that at some point in the process we take over. It is a half-grace thing. Jesus started the work, and it is up to each one of us to finish it. But our salvation, from beginning to end, is the work of God’s grace and not our work. If you are going to effectively share the gospel of grace, you must know his grace for yourself.

The rich man not only came with the right question, he came to the right person. He came to Jesus. In the Gospel of John, when the crowds are leaving because of some difficult teaching Jesus had just given, Jesus asks the twelve disciples, “Do you want to go away as well?” Peter answers, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:67–68).

But now notice in Luke 18:19 the response of Jesus, “Why do you call me good? There is no one good except God alone.” Jesus’s words to the rich man are upsetting to many people, but those people are upset for the wrong reasons. They are concerned that Jesus doesn’t know who he is. Is Jesus suffering from an identity crisis? We tend to paraphrase his words something like, “Why do you call me good, because only God is good? I’m not quite sure who I am; can you help me?”

However, Jesus is telling the rich man something about himself, something the rich man doesn’t want to hear. None of us wants to hear Jesus’s words as saying something about *us*. What Jesus says—and what we don’t want to believe—is, “No one is good but God alone.” Or, more personally, “I am not good,” or even more pointedly, “I am evil.” The rich man, like most of us, asks a question but doesn’t listen to the answer. It blows right by him.

Deaf to the first words that Jesus spoke, the rich man nonetheless hears Jesus mention keeping the Law and responds, “All these I have kept from my youth” (Luke 18:21). In Jewish tradition, before a young man is bar mitzvahed, he is not responsible for what he does. The rich man is informing Jesus that he was keeping the law before

the law was required of him; therefore, he should have built up extra credit.

Jesus answers him, “There’s just one thing left.” The rich man must have become excited. “Yes! Just one last thing and I can have eternal life; just one more thing that I must do.”

Jesus tells him, “Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Luke 18:22). The smile of confidence the rich man must have had a moment earlier immediately became despair and dread because he was absolutely helpless and he knew it.

Jesus, with his response to the rich man, gave him a way to understand his position before God—which this man was completely oblivious to. It’s as if Jesus was giving the rich man an altimeter. Let me explain.

I have never skydived, but I’m told that once you’ve jumped out of the plane, you reach maximum velocity in about twelve seconds. Instead of having a sensation that you are falling, you feel that you are floating in midair. Your sensory perception is being deceived because you have no way of measuring your altitude. Looking at the ground doesn’t help because the farmland below looks like a patchwork quilt. If you were to close your eyes you’d think you were floating and could stay that way forever, but just about that time you’d hit the ground at 120 miles an hour.

The rich man didn’t want to hear what Jesus was saying to him. He wanted to believe he strapped on his wooden wings and tail and was doing a pretty good job keeping afloat. He couldn’t hear Jesus say—“You’re not flying; you’re falling uncontrollably to your death.” We don’t want to believe it either.

In the movie *Toy Story*, Woody and Buzz argue about whether he is a real spaceman and whether or not he can fly. Buzz then proves that he can, actually “fly.” He bounces off the bed with the shout “To infinity, and beyond!” and through a series of bizarre circumstances, he ricochets off a ball, rebounds into the air, gets slung around in the

fan, and lands safely on the bed. All the toys shout, “He flew! He flew!” Exasperatedly, Woody declares, “That wasn’t flying; that was falling with style.”

Jesus told the rich man and all of us that when it comes to our relationship with God, even the best of us are only falling with style. We are hopelessly and helplessly crashing to the ground, and there is nothing in us that can change our circumstances.

The rich man, like our barnstormer flailing away with his wooden wings and tail, believed he was flying. Jesus’s words made him realize he had no hope at all. He wasn’t flying; he was falling.

The idea that we must do something to contribute to our salvation, or at least activate it, causes many people to turn Jesus’s words into a let’s-try-harder approach to Christianity. We, like the rich man, can’t hear what Jesus is saying. We interpret Jesus’s words—“it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24)—not as words of impossibility, but as an exhortation to try harder.

We’ve even built a theological explanation to support this let’s-try-harder interpretation. It has been suggested that Jesus is not talking about a sewing needle but a gate in Jerusalem (gates in the Middle East do resemble a needle’s eye). The gate, called Eye of the Needle, is smaller than the main gate. When the main gate is closed, travelers must use the smaller gate. In order for camels to pass through this gate they must have their cargo removed from their backs and get down on their knees. Therefore, the application for this passage becomes “let’s try harder!” However, to date, archaeologists have not found such a gate.

Another variation of the let’s-try-harder interpretation is to look at the Aramaic words behind our Greek translation of Jesus’s statement. In Aramaic, the word for *rope* and *camel* are the same. This interpretation makes Jesus’s words literal, a real needle and a real thread, and we all know how difficult it is to get thread through that tiny hole that we can barely see. But *we* can still do it.

Both interpretations try to jump through all kinds of hoops (or a needle's eye), rather than give up on our let's-try-harder approach. They want to hold on to the idea that it is up to us to make things right between God and us. In fact, the harder we make the process on ourselves, the better we like it.

What if the rich man *had* responded to Jesus's words by selling all that he had to gain the kingdom of heaven? What would have been his motivation behind that act? Wouldn't it have been selfishness? Wouldn't it have been the desire to obtain something for him, something that he wanted very much? Is that good?

Paul doesn't think so. In 1 Corinthians 13, he writes, "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain *nothing*" (1 Corinthians 13:3, emphasis mine). Even if the rich man had said, "All right, Jesus, I'm going to do that to earn my way to heaven," it would not have been enough because the act would have been one of selfishness—not out of love for God, and certainly not out of love for his neighbor.

There is an even more certain way that we know Jesus is not teaching a let's-try-harder approach, but rather showing us that we are falling hopelessly to the ground and not flying. Look at the conversation Jesus has with his disciples immediately afterward. From the people's response to Jesus's conversation with the rich man—"Then who can be saved?" (Luke 18:26)—it is clear that they took Jesus's words to be a literal camel going through a literal needle.

The people are concerned because it is no longer a question about a rich man, but every man. They are thinking, "If you're asking that of a rich man, then what hope can regular people have?"

In the Old Testament, riches were considered a symbol of God's blessings. A rich man was a man who was blessed by God, a man who was close to God, and his wealth was proof that God favored him. If this rich man couldn't get into heaven because of all he had done—and there is no reason to doubt his devotion—what were the chances

of regular people gaining eternal life? If you had little, it was already assumed that God cared little for you.

Jesus answered, “What is impossible with men is possible with God” (Luke 18:27). We must hear and understand what Jesus is saying. Jesus teaches that eternal life is something that God must provide because it is beyond anything any of us are capable of obtaining. It’s like flying: we can’t; it isn’t in our nature. Even the best of us are falling with style.

Peter, not yet ready to give up on his let’s-try-harder approach—and thus ignoring everything Jesus just said—wants to believe that he can contribute something to his salvation. He interrupts in verse 28, and essentially says, “Wait a minute, Jesus. We *did* that. We did exactly what you asked us to do. So why are you saying it’s impossible? We’ve *done* it! We *have* left our homes, lands, families, and wealth. Haven’t we earned eternal life?”

Let me summarize Jesus’s response to Peter with an illustration: If I need to borrow ten dollars for lunch today and I promise to give you back twenty dollars tomorrow, would you be willing to loan me the ten dollars? Would someone “love” me enough to make that “sacrifice”? I’m sure your willingness to give me lunch money would have nothing to do with the ten dollars that your investment will return tomorrow.

That’s the essence of Jesus’s response to all Peter’s “sacrifices” to live the Christian life. “Peter, what have you given up? You’ve gained houses and homes and land in this life, and in the life to come” (see Luke 18:29–30). There is nothing that we give up for Christ that isn’t returned many times over.

Immediately after this story, Jesus speaks of his own death and resurrection. But why? Why would Jesus, after talking about salvation being impossible with man but possible with God, immediately talk about his death and resurrection? Because it is through the death and resurrection of Christ that God does what we cannot do. It’s

through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection that we, who are evil, are made good. It's by what Jesus has done for us, and not what we do for him, that puts us in a proper relationship with God, through Christ. The disciples, however, "understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (Luke 18:34).

The narrative becomes even more interesting because our next story is about a blind beggar. The blind man was sitting by the road when he heard a large crowd passing by and asked, "What's all the commotion about?" Someone answered, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by" (Luke 18:37). He had heard about Jesus, and he knew that Jesus opened the eyes of the blind.

But it's not just the blind man who could not see. Jesus's own disciples were blind. Their blindness was spiritual, whereas the beggar's blindness was physical. The blind man began to shout, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" (Luke 18:39). The people around him told him to be quiet because they thought Jesus didn't want anything to do with him. But Jesus heard the blind man. Calling him forward, he opened his eyes.

To prove that only God makes us right with Him through Christ, we need to keep reading further. The next story, in Luke 19, is about Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is a rich man. He's a *very* rich man. The principal difference between Zacchaeus and the rich man in chapter 18 is that the rich man is a very good man in his own right and in the eyes of those around him. Zacchaeus, because he is a tax collector, is a very bad man. If a rich good man cannot save himself, what are the chances of this rich, bad man being able to save himself?

But what happens to Zacchaeus? Jesus declares that he is a recipient of salvation. He has been made right with God by Jesus's declaration, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). That's another way of saying that Zacchaeus has eternal life.

If I were the rich ruler, I would be angry at Jesus. I would say, “Wait a minute, Jesus, I object. Is the kingdom on sale today? Are you giving a 50 percent discount to this evil man? You asked me to give up everything to follow you, but you didn’t ask Zacchaeus to give up *anything*. He just volunteered to give up half of all he owns and give back fourfold what he’d stolen (Luke 19:8), and you accepted that. How come you accepted only half from Zacchaeus, but from me you asked for everything?”

Jesus’s concern was not the money, but the heart. What did Zacchaeus do to inherit eternal life? He welcomed Jesus joyfully (Luke 19:6). That’s it.

Jesus’s name in Hebrew means “salvation.” Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly. So when Jesus says, “salvation has come to this house,” it is a play on words. Salvation has come to Zacchaeus’s home because Jesus, God’s salvation, was gladly welcomed. Salvation has literally come, in the flesh, into Zacchaeus’s home.

For further proof, let’s look at the episode that takes place just *before* Jesus’s encounter with the rich young ruler. In Luke 18:15, little children are being brought to Jesus and he’s blessing them. The blind man couldn’t get to Jesus because he was blind. Zacchaeus couldn’t see Jesus because of his height, and he believed that because of his sin Jesus would have nothing to do with him. Likewise, the children have no chance of getting to Jesus unless someone brings them. Jesus says to his disciples, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Luke 18:16–17).

The children had a problem getting to Jesus; the blind man had a problem getting to Jesus; and Zacchaeus had a problem getting to Jesus. But who had *no* problem getting to Jesus? The rich man. The children, considered unimportant, were probably chased away so that Jesus could have this interview with this very important and wealthy man.

The children couldn't get to Jesus, the blind man couldn't get to Jesus, and Zacchaeus couldn't get to Jesus—but Jesus could get to them! As Jesus himself promised, “the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10).

The good news of the gospel is that you cannot get to Jesus, but he can get to you. He can hear you over the noise, he can see you through the crowd, and he saves his people.

What do we know about Zacchaeus, other than that he was a tax collector? He was little—just like children were little. Jesus just told us, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it” (Luke 18:17). Not only was Zacchaeus childlike in his stature, he was also childlike in his behavior. What was Zacchaeus doing when Jesus found him? He had climbed a tree. When was the last time you climbed a tree? When you were a child. Zacchaeus did a very childlike thing; he climbed a tree just to see Jesus.

We may not have realized it, but Jesus has already introduced us to both the rich man and Zacchaeus—in Luke 18, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Instead of creating a parable about two hypothetical people, Jesus very well could have actually *seen* these two men praying in the temple. He may have been there when they were praying—and later on answered each of their prayers. What did the rich ruler ask for? Nothing. He needed nothing, not a thing. He informed God of what a good job he was doing. “Look at me fly!”

What did the tax gatherer ask for? He prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (Luke 18:13). What did the blind man ask for? Mercy. He understood that he was crashing to the ground.

Are you beginning to see why it's grace from beginning to end? Our wooden wings and wooden tail are of no value. We are crashing to the ground because flying—even flying with style—is completely contrary to our nature. What we need is for God to give us mercy and grace so that Christ might do *through* us those things that are not *in* us.

Perhaps you're thinking, "I can never be a Christian. I've got too many bad habits that disqualify me." That's not true—unless you have the one bad habit of not asking Christ for mercy and for grace, unless you refuse to welcome Jesus gladly. It is Jesus that saves us. Jesus changes us. It's not us. Jesus is the answer to our prayers.

Perhaps you've been a Christian for a long time and still struggle. You believe that you can never change. Have you traded in Christ for a set of wooden wings and tail? Don't you know that what was begun by grace must be completed with grace? In Paul's words to the churches in Galatia, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (Galatians 1:6). There is another way to fly.

For my fortieth birthday, my wife and children decided they would give me a special gift. They had to tell me about the gift a couple of weeks before my birthday so we could prepare for it. My girls all gathered around me and said, "For your birthday, we want to take you parasailing!"

I responded, "Isn't that where you jump off a cliff with a parachute?"

And they said, "Yeah, Daddy, that'll be great!"

I said, trying to mask my fear, "I'm a simple man. Just a small party at home, with some friends and family, a cake, some candles—that's really all I need." What I meant was, *My only true desire is to make sure I celebrate my forty-first birthday.*

I was scared to death. I was even more frightened when I found out that my wife had taken out a life insurance policy! But I thought of a way out. The Bible says that the prayers of a righteous man avail much. Elijah prayed and it did not rain, and he prayed and it did rain (see James 5:17). I knew that if it rained we would have to cancel the plunge to my death. So I prayed it would rain.

The morning of my birthday was clear and dry with a crispness in the air. It was a beautiful day in southern France—perfect weather for crashing to the ground. *So much for the prayers of a righteous man*, I thought. We loaded up the car and began driving toward the

mountains where I would do this thing. The entire time I was hoping that the car would break down or a tire would go flat—anything to get out of this predicament.

As we reached the top of the mountain and went through a tunnel, I looked up, and up again. There were cliffs! I knew that had to be where we were headed. There was no way I could do this.

I found the building where I was to sign up. I thought I had one last opportunity to get out of this. I told my family to stay in the car. This way I could go cancel my trip and tell them there was a problem and that I wouldn't be able to parasail today.

But as I entered the building, there was a young girl in front of me, about twelve or thirteen years of age. She was all excited, saying, "Where do I sign up? This is going to be fun!" The gentleman behind the table asked me my name, and as soon as I gave it to him he said, "Yes, you're all paid up. We just need you to sign this release and get in the van because we're ready to go." I figured I couldn't show how frightened I was in front of the French—after all, I *am* an American. So I said, "Can you explain to me what I am to do?"

"Just follow us to the van and we will explain everything on the trip up the mountain." I kissed my wife and three daughters good-bye—maybe it would be the last time—and got into the van.

I sat right behind the driver, tapping him on the shoulder and interrupting his conversation with his colleague. I said, "Can you tell me what I need to do?" He responded, "I'll tell you when we get up to the top," and he went back to talking to his friend. It was obvious he didn't want to be disturbed.

We pulled up to the top of this mountain. There was a grassy plain and then it dropped off about sixty yards from where the van was parked. I said again to the driver, "What do you want me to do?"

He said, "I need to get everybody set up. Why don't you just stand over there and wait for me?" as he pointed toward the cliff.

"Over *there*?" I asked.

"Yes, over there."

“How *far* over there?”

“Over there by the edge, but not too close. Just stand over there.”

“OK,” I halfheartedly responded.

After getting everyone else ready, the gentleman came over and laid out our parachute on the ground. I once more asked him, “What am I to do?” He handed me a harness and told me to put it on. “What do you want me to do *now*?” I asked.

He explained, “I’m going to clip my harness onto your harness and then I want you to lean forward and step off the cliff.”

“Shouldn’t I be behind you?”

“No, because I’m hooked into you,” he said. “You simply lean forward and step off the cliff.”

I asked, “What about my hands? What should I do with them?”

“Hold onto these ropes.”

“Great!” I exclaimed. “Finally, something I get to do! What do holding onto these ropes do?”

“They keep your hands out of my face.”

We edged forward, until I could see over the cliff. Then he said to me impatiently, “Lean forward and step off the cliff.”

“Shouldn’t we count to three or something?”

“No, just lean forward and step off the cliff,” he repeated.

Closing my eyes, we leaned forward, causing the parachute to rise and fill with air. I stepped out, and we were immediately lifted off the ground. I opened my eyes and realized I wasn’t crashing to my death, but was being carried upward by the thermal winds. As we banked to the left, continuing to rise, I could hear the swooshing of the wind as we were swept along the cliffs. The cliffs that looked so ominous from below, now close up were beautiful. You could see how the wind and weather had worn the rocks into beautiful shapes. You could even see birds nesting in the crags.

We banked right out over the valley. Below us were vineyards, lavender, and sunflower fields. A stream with the sun reflecting off it ran down the middle of the valley. I was caught up in the beauty of

what I saw around me. Before I knew it, my hands, which had been white-knuckled and clinging to the ropes, had dropped to my side.

We banked again and came along the cliffs, then again soared back over the valley. It seemed like we were up there forever, floating effortlessly, endlessly, and then slowly descending. We touched the ground, where my family cheered.

That's salvation, Christ's way.

So you have a choice: you can strap on those wooden wings and tail and attempt the impossible—or you can entrust yourself to Christ, who will be able to do through you what you cannot do yourself. If you want what I have just described to be true in your life, then just simply do what Jesus asks. Lean forward and step off—repent and believe. Cry out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy on me!”

But the above story isn't just for those who don't know Christ. It's really a story for those of us who *have* been walking with Christ. Because what we tend to do once the Lord gets us off the ground is take out our wooden wings and tail and let Jesus know that we'll take it from here. We begin flailing away, believing we're at least helping him out. But all our efforts are not adding one bit to what Christ has done for us. If anything, we're robbing him of his glory because in our foolishness we believe that we're making a real difference.

We must realize it is all Jesus and nothing of us and give him all the praise and glory. The Christian life is lived—from beginning to end—by grace. If we are going to share this message with others, we must first know it for ourselves.