

J E S U S

O V E R

E V E R Y

T H I N G

JESUS
OVER

EVERY
THING

UNCOMPLICATING THE DAILY
STRUGGLE TO PUT JESUS FIRST

LISA WHITTLE



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For my Truest Love since I was six

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ONE

THE LAND OF THE DEADLY OVERS

WE ARE BORN HOMESICK, EVERY ONE OF US.
—LORE WILBERT

As long as I can remember, I've been hungry for a simpler life.

Enter Enid, Oklahoma, the home of my splintery tree fort, brown paneled-wall country home, venison Crock-Pot cook-offs, and the last place I remember life not feeling like a raging list of to-dos. I was about six, maybe seven. I ran in the grass and held stray kittens for a living, without knowing about catching the dreaded ringworm. (I eventually found out.) Daddy preached in the big church in town, and Mom did basically everything else, so far as I could see.

It's not that the years that followed brought monumental snags. It's that those years of holding kittens are the last *I can remember* feeling completely carefree. Preteen angst shortly took over. Awareness of people not keeping their word. And the life juggle in general that requires priority lists. I've always been a list queen, with the hopes of keeping it all straight. Interesting how people I know who live by these lists claim they bring us the sanity that they secretly steal from us.

JESUS OVER EVERYTHING

And then there's Jesus.

He's a large part of my simpler life story and my list story too: the fifth member of the Reimer family, woven in between Daddy, Mom, older brother Mark, and me during those blessed early years. (The deer carcasses hanging in the garage don't count since they contributed only to the cook-offs, and my little sister wasn't born yet.) Unlike my brother and me, with our personalized rooms, Jesus got free rein

Interesting how people I know who live by these lists claim they bring us the sanity that they secretly steal from us.

over every room in the house but lived especially in the big white Bible on the coffee table and, since I was six, inside of me. I grasped this concept because my parents explained it to me, and I believed it for myself since it was some-

thing I accepted, received, and, subsequently, felt. Our family loved Him—both my parents, in their own way, made sure. I loved Him. My whole life I have.

But I also love me. Sometimes I love me more. This is where things get complicated.

Forty years later and it remains the story of my life.

ME OVER JESUS

A few years ago I did something long overdue: I went on a one-year shopping fast.

I wish I could say I did it because I wanted to. I would prefer to spin this with me looking spiritual and disciplined. But the truth is I did it because one day God nudged me into it by good old-fashioned embarrassment.

I'll tell you about that. But first, let's go back.

My expression through clothes came early for me as a little girl—my mom told me so, and I've seen it myself in pictures: the

cool, strapless clogs with striped, mismatched Dorrie-esque socks (yes, *that* Dorrie from the library books) with the floral, off-the-shoulder dress for an attempt at eclecticism (close but no cigar). Then came those wide teenage belts and funky MC Hammer pants and all that unapologetic '80s flair as I got older. I found no suitable prom dresses to fit my style, so I had my mom make them.

Clothes, even to this day, make me feel like my most authentic me. Putting them together: an art. Wearing what I want no matter the rules: a rebellion. I find particular pleasure in buying clothes on a budget—looking like I pay far more for things than I actually have. It has become a bit of a game to me in my adulthood—from my clothes to my home décor—feeling joy over how many times I can secure wide-eyed compliments like *You paid what? No way. That looks too good.* Like the brown-and-silver vases I purchased from Publix at \$12.99 apiece when my kids were mere babies, the ones that sat on my mantel for years. My heart leaped every time I heard the words, “You mean the grocery store Publix?” I’d grown so fond of my talent in shopping over the years. It had become a trusted and dear friend.

So when God began to talk to me about how shopping had gotten too high on my priority list, I balked at the ludicrous suggestion.

I don’t buy expensive things. I have not and do not put our family into debt. For twenty years, up until a few months ago when it became a work necessity, I didn’t even own a credit card. It felt ridiculous to think of shopping as a problem for me or for God. I was worshipping Him, loving Him, doing full-time ministry for Him. I felt like He should let me have this one.

We stayed at a stalemate.

Life went on, and I flew to Honduras to serve God some more. I spoke to a crowded roomful of people with a Spanish interpreter—kissed the cheek of a woman who was days away from dying with cancer with no meds to ease the raging pain inside her bones. I wrapped my favorite necklace around the neck of a local woman who

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could speak to me only through her eyes and hugged her tight enough to say “I love you” with my arms. *See me loving You most, God?* I thought, in the quiet of my mind. *See how I’m not bound by my love for things and can even give up my favorite necklace? See how You are over all of my life?* I felt proud of myself for all the ways I was putting Jesus at the top of my list.

I came back home to the US to a waiting family, a warm bed, and a full closet, which dug at me a little after the poverty I’d just seen. But I wasn’t unaware. I knew I had plenty. I just didn’t see my plenty as any type of competition with God. The two were most certainly not connected because I was a good Christian woman doing good Christian things.

Meanwhile, my closet was packed to the brim and could sometimes be annoying. Hanger behind hanger. Clothes I had never worn and forgot I had, with tags still on them. Even with the few pounds I’d lost from being in Honduras and experiencing the unfortunate stomach incident, due to some soured *tres leches* cake, I was still a bit heavier than usual. And I was at a loss as to what to wear to an upcoming speaking event. My crowded closet wasn’t making it easy on me.

So I called Shari.

Shari, the bubbly redhead, is one of my most favorite friends. She also happens to be a fashion stylist, which is convenient for times like this. Not used to inviting people into my closet, getting clothes advice, or making SOS calls, I trust Shari. Little did I know her coming was actually the date Jesus had marked on the calendar to put a stop to my lingering denial. Good thing I knew little, or I probably wouldn’t have asked her to come. But Jesus does us the biggest favor when He puts a stop to things that are secretly chipping away at us. Tough love comes in different forms, and sometimes it looks more like the Sovereign ordaining someone to find out your secret than like your nonconfrontational best friend finally getting enough moxie to tell you some hard truth.

“Oh, my word—you have so many clothes, Lisa,” Shari said, thumbing through my clothes with wide eyes and that signature Shari laugh. “*I do?*” I asked, sincerely. I knew I had plenty. I just couldn’t imagine a clothes person such as Shari thinking it was a lot. And that was *the moment*. Shari meant and thought nothing of her passing comment. She wasn’t there to judge, nor is she the type. She was already back into her great outfit search, chatty and unaware, but my mind had now escaped us. I could see nothing but gross excess. Clothes I didn’t wear. Clothes I couldn’t fit into. Clothes, clothes, clothes, and shoes and hats and bags too. At some point I’d bought them all, probably for a bargain. And I’d probably felt proud.

I’m not proud now. I’m embarrassed.

For months, God had been readying my heart for Shari’s passing comment to be my moment of cataclysmic conviction.

It was not about the amount of money I spent on clothes or items for my home. It wasn’t about if I technically could afford them or if I bought things without going into debt. It was about what I had chosen over God sometimes to numb myself or give myself a high when I was sad or happy or bored. It was about what had become for me a “deadly over”—*overindulging* my visual wants and cravings and grossly making my life more complicated as a result. My having so many clothes that I didn’t even know what to wear was the small symptom, but the big symptom was the angst, that nagging feeling of being out of control, which led to the cycle of guilt, regret, and justification when shopping. If I’d been honest with myself in so many of the moments I’d hid behind my swiped debit card, Jesus could have helped me. It was in *that* moment, in my closet with Shari, that I realized how I’d been putting myself over Jesus, even with the silly shopping I usually thought nothing of.

If I’d been honest with myself in so many of the moments I’d hid behind my swiped debit card, Jesus could have helped me.

JESUS OVER EVERYTHING

Three months after Shari visited me in my closet, I started my one-year shopping fast.

I did it for one whole year—buying nothing for myself that was a want versus a need in the clothes or home décor department (my two areas of historical overindulgence). I made it without buying a single thing, though at times I came close. I learned the art of having things in a cart, walking away, and not feeling embarrassed over it (sorry, all the store workers who found my abandoned carts). I got used to staying away from stores, completely. Over time, it became a new lifestyle. I felt God becoming more important to me than my momentary need to fix myself with something that will never fix me.

Maybe this comes easy for you—putting Jesus above yourself. But not over here. It's never easy for me to put Jesus over me. It's intense and upheaving and gets a tiny bit gnarly, and I don't normally use that word. If I look back in my life, I can see how nearly every decision to clear my life of the clutter it had accumulated (and, as a result, had started causing me pain in some way) grew into Jesus becoming more important, not less.

I wish our motives as humans were driven by sheer purity, but that's not how it typically goes. Discomfort is more likely our change agent, and I'm grateful Jesus accepts our meager starts, isn't snobby about our growth processes, and sticks around as we grow into rightly placed passion for Him.

Occasionally people have said to me, "I wish I were as strong as you," and I always want to either cry or laugh and say, "Are you kidding me? I've spent half my life feeling weak and internally terrified."

I'm grateful Jesus accepts our meager starts, isn't snobby about our growth processes, and sticks around as we grow into rightly placed passion for Him.

Please don't think me some kind of spiritual freak. Most of the change God has done in me has come from me doing things the hard way, that is, *my way*. This is the upheaving of self, long

buried in the denial tactics we humans are so good at mastering. Moments when I found myself in such a mess, with Jesus holding me as He cleaned my wounds, reminding me of His wellness plan. This is the gnarly priority reordering I previously mentioned, and I suspect you've been there too. I haven't forgotten that history. When you've been maimed from self-inflicted wounds, you don't soon forget. The truth is, I can't choose my way over Jesus' way anymore because I can't afford the scars. A Jesus-over-everything lifestyle is a *Jesus-take-over-me-and-my-lifestyle* so I don't ruin my one precious life. But even more than that, it's the understanding that the priority of Jesus brings order to the chaos of our lives, a job only God is big enough to do.

A Jesus-over-everything lifestyle is the understanding that the priority of Jesus brings order to the chaos of our lives, a job only God is big enough to do.

If we want our lives to work, the Jesus-first life *is* the way. God doesn't want us to waste our lives trying to maneuver another way, making life more complicated in the process. As the Creator of the system of order, He knows how things will work. It is exactly as Jill Carattini, managing editor of *A Slice of Infinity* at Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, says,

There is a phrase in Latin that summarizes the idea that the shape of our deepest affections is the shape of our lives. *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* is an axiom of ancient Christianity, meaning: the rule of worship is the rule of belief is the rule of life. That is, our deepest affections (whatever it might be that we focus on most devotedly) shapes the way we believe and, in turn, the way we live. In a cultural ecosystem where we seem to worship possibilities, where freedom is understood as the absence of limitation upon our choices, and where the virtue of good multitasking has replaced the virtue of singleness of heart, it is understandable that we are both

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truly and metaphorically “all over the place”—mentally, spiritually, even bodily, in a state of perpetual possibility-seeking.¹

Here’s a piece of crucial news: it’s not enough to go through life led by our cognition. It’s not even enough to pray about things if we believe that releasing our burdens recuses us from next steps and we expect Jesus to do all the work from there. “If a person says to those who are cold and hungry, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” asks Yale theologian Miroslav Volf.² This is the reality of why many of us continue to experience being overwhelmed by our life, year after year. We beg God for help in the midst of a life with a mixed-up order of priorities and wonder why things aren’t working; yet when we put Him over all the things on our list, myriad complications fall away. If you’ve ever done this, even in one decision, you know it’s true. If you haven’t yet, I hope you’ll try it. We aren’t pain-free, struggle-free, problem-free (John 16:33). But we have fewer complications, which is what is at the core of much of our daily angst.

I’m okay with it if you want to put Jesus over everything—starting with yourself—for a reason other than one that is superspiritual. Maybe you feel like it’s the right thing to do. Maybe you feel it is expected of you as a follower of Jesus. Maybe your heart really isn’t in it right now and you are leaning toward making the choice simply because you’re embarrassed you never have before. Or maybe your decisions up to this point have created a complicated life or situation, and that’s not the life you want, so it’s more about finally trying it God’s way. From someone who wildly reaped the benefits of a year’s shopping fast—and who was largely embarrassed into it—let me just say that sometimes a bad reason to start is enough. And on this Jesus-over-everything journey, I have faith that if you stay committed to it, somewhere along the way it will become a new lifestyle.

And you’ll want it this way because it is the way it’s supposed to be.

WHAT'S NOT WORKING RIGHT NOW BUT CAN

Don't assume that because your life isn't working, you need a whole different life. Sometimes you need God to finally run yours. Too often we throw perfectly good lives in the trash in search of ones we end up tarnishing all over. The core of why our lives don't work isn't the life itself but what we internally never made right. This is why we wind up repeating patterns.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I should tell you that it wasn't the embarrassment alone that led me into the shopping fast, but also because on many levels, my closet wasn't working for me. With all the clothes behind clothes, so-much-in-my-closet-there-are-too-many-choices-it-is-frying-my-brain, it wasn't bringing me joy, and Marie Kondo wasn't around yet, telling us things like that. We innately know things that are not working for us. Sometimes we just don't know how to change.

We innately know things that are not working for us. Sometimes we just don't know how to change.

I've watched humans awhile, and I have a theory. Despite our temporary feelings, there are three things that make our lives not work in the long term:

1. too many options
2. getting away with something that is not good for us
3. trying to handle everything ourselves

Too many options lead to mental confusion, second-guessing, and dissatisfaction with our lives. We spend our lives in angst over the great what ifs—what if we had picked that life or that spouse or that job or made that choice instead of this one, and the list goes on. We don't have to sit in scarcity, for the most part, and we are glad about that, but the allure of option is what actually drives us mad. More options

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are not what we are after. A less-complicated life is. Options will not help with that, but we like them, regardless.

Getting away with things we know aren't good for us isn't working for us either. For months, maybe years, I knew shopping wasn't holding me together. I knew it wasn't helping me live a more purposeful, focused life. It was muddying the waters. Many times I could have run to Jesus to help me sort out something, but I ran to Nordstrom Rack instead. Most of the time when I wanted something on sale, I really wanted His peace. I thwarted lasting spiritual thirst-quenching by taking water breaks. Every sinner grows weary enough eventually, and we want permanent deliverance—not just sips that get us by. It's a matter of how dehydrated we allow ourselves to become while on the journey. Admitting that something that isn't hurting us visibly is a sin is perhaps the hardest leap to make. Deflection is far easier, and a lot of us are experts.

And then there's the issue of our crippling belief in self-sufficiency. The most capable, independent human is one in whom perhaps God alone knows the weak spot. Eventually the bootstraps wear from over-pulling. The brute strength comes to an end. The flesh struggle never does. It's why promises of self-sufficiency are damaging to a world hungry to bypass God. We are eager for that message, though fools to believe it. If we could fast-track our process to getting what we want and go around God, we would, every time—He's too slow and generally uncooperative for our liking in most cases. We like our independence, and we may even do well with it for a time. But eventually we will let ourselves down and lose confidence in our abilities—a place where God can do some of His greatest work. And in that place we will desperately want someone to take care of us.

We like options until they make life too complicated.

We like doing what we want until our choices make matters worse.

We like our independence until we need to be taken care of.

Too often, when our lives no longer work, we assume it is time to

get new lives: pull out of marriages, leave churches, search for quick fixes to solve money issues, cut friendships, move somewhere else, drop a project to start a new one. And at the end of the day, we are still left with

Eventually we will let ourselves down and lose confidence in our abilities—a place where God can do some of His greatest work.

the hole within. What we actually need is for God to adjust the lives we have by taking over and running things. When we build a life on the priority of experiences, we can expect to get disillusioned by the highs and lows. Nothing is worse than living unsettled. Nothing is more symptomatic of human self-governance than living from high to high.

What is not working for you right now may look like shopping or any other excess or even something you don't see as excess. Giving up priority in your life to Jesus may not be your typical solution, but I can assure you, it's the key to making your life work.

WHY WE CAN'T BE FIRST

I do not do well with second place.

That tragic time in high school home ec, when we had a contest and I took home second place—the first-place-loser silver ribbon—after making an entire dress, was not a good day. My mom, being a master seamstress, already had me overblowing my abilities on a sewing machine, and I will testify firsthand that this is a skill not passed down through genetics. Forget that the dress wound up Barbie-sized, and I wasn't able to pull it up over my hips to see how it looked. In my mind it was a *Project Runway* dream. The winning title was practically stolen out from under me and given to the quiet girl in the corner who had been sewing since she was five. I don't know if that was her real story, but it's the one I told myself to cope with the loss.

As with most Jesus-over-everything realities we find much easier

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to read about than live, we may comprehend the priority order issue. But sometimes we just want to give our abilities a whirl. Some of us like the idea of control more than others (ahem), but we all like it, and because we are so easily enticed by our desires, it takes a pile of mess of our own doing to show us tangible proof of why us being boss doesn't work. Without the immeasurable gift of sovereignty, we are left with a serious case of being right in our own eyes—something I suspect we will die praying to overcome.

We can't be first because if we were,

we would make the wrong decision,
we would give someone bad advice,
we would quit before we should,
we would hang on to something we need to let go of and vice
versa,
we wouldn't be able to keep the world spinning,
we wouldn't be able to prevent tragedies or pull off redemption,
and
we couldn't save anyone from their sins.

These are just a few of the reasons we can't be first.

So then we are left to pray away this stubborn, misguided will that feeds us the ridiculous notion that we can do this thing better than God. We have skinned our knees so blessed many times, and we still think we won't fall down over this or that. Our decisions have been flighty and error filled, and we remain convinced we have the whole thing figured out. God holds none of this against us. But He'd like us to open our eyes and see. It is in our best interest that He is over everything, since He cannot make such mistakes.

Colossians 1:18 speaks beautifully about Jesus' positioning—the “preeminence” of Christ (κ₁ν), which, in several translations, is substituted with *first place* (HCSB) or simply *first*. As Paul was writing to

the church at Colossae, during his imprisonment in Rome, he was reminding people he had never met and only heard of that Jesus is enough. (This issue, the one we still struggle to grasp, is at the core of prioritization: do we believe He is *enough*?) These believers' reputation for mixing elements of paganism and secular philosophy with their Christian beliefs had reached Paul, and he was eager to give them a healthy dose of reality: "Look at all Jesus has done for you; remember who Jesus is; now make him number one" (vv. 12–23, author's paraphrase).

From Paul's words to our eyes, minds, and hearts today.

When we are tempted to take back authority in our lives, *Jesus first*.

When we forget how much we have made a mess running things, *Jesus first*.

When we start to think we might just want to take another crack at it and see how it goes, *Jesus first*.

Right now,

- look at all Jesus has done for you.
- remember who He is.
- decide if that is worth making Him number one.

DEADLY OVERS

I talk with people for a living, which is a humorous plot twist for an introvert who grew up hiding under tables at steak houses on Sunday afternoons after church so people wouldn't talk to me. Long before the *Jesus over Everything* podcast, I was traveling to places and speaking, meeting people at book tables and praying with them at altars, sandwiched between bleacher conversations with my kids' schoolmates' parents and coffee dates with friends and fellow life journeyers. I don't

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know how many people I've talked to in my life, but I do know this: we say many of the same things:

I apologize for everything.

I overbook myself because I don't want to let people down.

I get in my head and go down so many negative mental roads.

I constantly feel the need to explain myself.

We have the same look on our face with every confession: one of defeat, frustration, and pain. We long for that simpler life, where none of this is so complicated—people say what they mean, we take each other at face value, we don't feel such pressure to please or keep up, we leave room for mistakes, we don't feel used, and we stay committed at all costs. We have the same hopeful standards for ourselves, even if we see the gaps more clearly in others. We live in this land where *everything* rules, except Jesus isn't at the core of any of it or it wouldn't be so out of whack.

With sisterly love, I hope you'll let me clear this up. We do some of these things because we are under a false assumption of emotional martyrdom as if the overdoing is in some way producing the humility and selflessness we can't seem to otherwise find. But let me make this clear: these things are not spiritual. They are not a substitute for the Jesus-over-everything lifestyle that actually produces those spiritual character qualities required for maturity. If you keep reading, this book will give you the true picture. I'm asking you to stop settling for this other fake mess—the destructive *overs* we find ourselves too

We are under a false assumption of emotional martyrdom as if the overdoing is in some way producing the humility and selflessness we can't seem to otherwise find.

often picking, not even realizing how they've led our lives to become complicated—and to embrace instead the godly *overs* that make for a more fulfilled, thriving life. I think if

you'll give this a chance, you'll see your life turn into the more settled one you've wanted.

We've been living in a deadly land of overs for a while, many of us, trying to make life work by forcing empty, self-serving production. Putting Jesus first is choosing the better land, handing us back our sanity.

OVERDOING

I've had to face a lot of things about myself this year, and much of it hasn't been pretty.

I've found myself in a counselor's office for the first time in many years, and it's taken nearly an act of Congress to get me there. If I do second place poorly, I do weak and in need even worse. I trust slightly less than that. (Feel better about yourself? You're welcome.) The reasons it's taken me so long to get into the counselor's office have become some of the main topics we discuss during my visits. Blessed irony.

Even before I started seeing this counselor, as a psychology student for the better part of five years (four in college and one postgraduate), I've done a lot of my own homework. They say you should be through grieving after two years—whoever “they” are—but I say that's bull. You grieve forever when you lose someone you love; it just comes in waves. As life goes on, the waves come less often but are no less strong. Since my father died, I've been sorting through the regular grief, plus the extra layers of questioning my legacy and my DNA—figuring out who I am outside of him, which is no small feat since people want to make me into his clone. This week it's been some lighter revelations. I realize that I come from a long line of overdoers, particularly on my father's side, which brings up memories that make me smile.

My paternal grandmother, known in the days of ceramics for gifting nearly the entire world with some figurine from her very own kiln (I still have an angel she made somewhere around here), spent her latter days knitting every living president an afghan (I also have at least three

afghans). Were she still alive, I feel confident she would show you the thank-you letters from them, with stamped signatures to prove it. My father, the proud driver of the largest truck man could own, with the largest tires to match, made quite an impression on the day he marched into my middle school with a yellow legal pad inscribed with three points (just like his sermons, the irony of which doesn't escape me) to lecture my PE teacher on why a C in her class was not acceptable for his little girl. A simple phone call for a man such as my father would never do. Both of these gems—Daddy and Grandma—are now in heaven, overdoing it somewhere together up there, I'm sure.

These are the fun memories, and then there are the harder ones too. Jesus wasn't at the forefront of my mind when I overindulged in sin or I wouldn't have done it. I've been like the Ephesians, forgetful of my first love (Revelation 2:4). The overdoing didn't start with my father's side of the family. It started further back than that—it's in the history and genetics of all of us—but it doesn't have to find comfortable residence with me unless I let it. Before Jesus can be over everything, we have to allow Him to remove from our lives what has thus far only complicated them.

OVERAPOLOGIZING

One of my most painful come-to-Jesus moments came about eight years ago through a volunteer assistant half my age. Sitting across the table from me at the cutest breakfast place in Franklin, Tennessee, Mary Kathryn said, "You apologize for your ministry, Lisa. Do you realize that?" I most certainly did not realize it, nor did I want this young woman I barely knew pointing it out.

"I do not," I told her flatly. I truly did not believe what she'd just said.

The older woman sitting with us, Shawna, piped in. "Yes, you do, Lisa. She's right."

I was having none of this, none of their harsh bluntness, none of

these things they could not possibly know. I moved on to the next thing, red-faced and flustered, filing this moment away to analyze it by myself—or maybe not.

It took about five soul-searching years for me to finally face the reality: I *had* been apologizing for my ministry, among many other things, for years. Half my life had been spent apologizing for things I needed not apologize for—while, at the same time, holding back from the truly necessary “I’m sorrys”—because pride had fooled me into thinking my false humility was actually the real thing.

I apologized to my brother and sister for being the one who got the writing career, when both are better writers than me, by diminishing my writing accomplishments or not even talking about my new projects.

I apologized to that girlfriend I shared history with, who desperately wanted to be the next Beth Moore (her words) and started acting weird when she found out I was teaching the Bible, by downplaying my ministry anytime we talked about it over coffee so she wouldn’t get upset.

I apologized to my friends whom I couldn’t spend time with like I wanted because I was always working, feeling guilty every time we were together, thinking it wasn’t enough.

I apologized for being successful to those who think I am and find me unworthy, and I apologized for being unsuccessful to those who invested time in me and I underperformed and disappointed them, and I apologized to those who think I shouldn’t use words like *successful* about ministry at all.

I realized that in so many ways, my apologizing was not only unnecessary but also self-serving. It was not humble; it was humiliating. It lifted no one. It was not about God. It was about the emotional slums of humanity—me wanting to serve me, me wanting to get people to like me, me wanting to ease someone else’s jealousy, me wanting to do work only God should do in all of us, the work only He can do.

Pride had fooled me into thinking my false humility was actually the real thing.

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And in the process I was watering down the beauty of true apology. I do not agree with people who tell us to hold back all the apologies. “I’m sorry” is a powerful practice—repentance and humility the result. Teri sent an Instagram DM to tell me as much:

I’ve been in a season of overapologizing in so many aspects of my life, and it has dumbed down when I am truly sorry. In one aspect I apologize to someone I highly respect because I believe if I apologize for things they are irrationally upset about, they will approve or like me. In other ways I’ve been silently and verbally apologizing for my gifts. It has made me at times regret my calling because I don’t feel accepted.

And so did Laura, who spoke about apology in this breathtaking way:

My brother-in-law just died at the age of fifty-nine. By the end he was saying “I’m sorry,” constantly, especially in my husband’s presence. It was clear that he was in a state of deep repentance. Sometimes it takes that glimpse of eternity before we realize the value of repentance. It was hard to watch but so sweet to cover him with love and forgiveness.

I felt every word Laura wrote. My own father apologized like this in his final months as well, mostly to my mother, whom for years he had put through many difficult things without apology, as far as I know. It was belated, but it was still a gift. How sad it would have been had we all missed out on that piece of redemption had he bought the advice “Don’t apologize.” In my twenty-four-year marriage, had we bought into the idea from the iconic novel and subsequent movie *Love Story*, that “love means never having to say you’re sorry,” my husband

and I never would have stayed together. No one can offer the vulnerability and raw humanity a real marriage requires without our flaws inflicting pain on our partner at some point. Apologies are good vital signs in a healthy relationship.

Wisdom is not about never apologizing. It's about sincere apology when it's right.

OVEREXPLAINING

Six months ago I would have been convinced I do not have a problem with overexplaining. That is, until I introduced podcast interviews to my audience and started listening back to them in the editing stage, with a wince and one closed eye. In the first few months of interviews, the amount of time I took asking my guests questions, especially hard questions, was shocking. I found myself painfully restating things, when I'm sure the guests caught it the first time around. For the sake of the audience, so many of these moments didn't make it past the cutting-room floor. Nothing like listening to yourself on-air to no longer be able to deny your shortcomings. (Ever watched yourself on video? Listened back to a voicemail? Then you know exactly what I mean.)

A lot of us are chronic overexplainers. We feel our first stab at words wasn't good. What we are saying doesn't feel adequate. We may be trying to couch a hard truth that needs to be said, so we say it . . . and then say it again, and again, and maybe again, if we feel it necessary. My friend Tracy tells me she is learning that "it's okay to say no without giving all the reasons." That "no is a complete sentence." A big and hard-fought amen to that. Not everyone needs to know why you can't come to that dinner party—maybe your daughter has revealed to you something difficult, and you are not in a good place to go and pretend when your heart is in pain. It's okay not to go, and it's okay to say you aren't coming, but thank you, and leave it at that. And on that note, may we all be better accepters without demanding explanations.

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Overexplaining is not simply being at a loss for good words, though I think it's what we feel at the time that drives us to put more words forward. It's about not feeling safe enough with each other to believe the other person won't fill in the gaps of a story he or she doesn't know. And it's about our need to control a narrative to ensure that doesn't happen. But what if we trusted God enough to help us heal from our micro-management of all that? What if we stopped stepping in and complicating things before He managed it in His time? The body of Christ needs Him in charge of our interactions to cover our silences and disappointments and bring understanding versus judgment—the way of unity. In that place, we can then trust that our lack of explaining will be met with understanding over the judgment we often feel.

OVERANALYZING

The world is full of thinkers and feelers, and both are a gift from God. Some of us come into this world with amazing natural radar. Add the Holy Spirit to that and you have a true gift to this world. Highly emotive people keep the rest of us accountable to the needs and hurts of folks—the world cannot exist without them. But thinking too much can also lead down dark roads. It can cause us to imagine things that aren't true, to make up entire narratives that hurt us unnecessarily. Relying on our feelings is dangerous as well. Feelings serve as a gauge but not a boss. As a creative, overanalyzing can cause me such pain because nothing is ever good enough—perfection creeps in, doubt takes over, and before I know it, I have become paralyzed by the thoughts in my head that don't have merit. This deadly “over” has taken up far too much time in my life through the years, and because we share humanity, I know I'm not alone.

OVERINDULGING

My shopping issues are a classic case of overindulging. But so are other things we like to ignore in a me-over-Jesus life. Eating. TV.

Drinking. Social media. Putting too much on our calendars. The danger is *we're numb to this list*. We've stopped being shocked by it, along with a lot of other things. Overindulgence is so common it doesn't seem like that big of a problem. Accountability seems antiquated and silly. Even little old ladies have their faces buried in a phone at the doctor's office now, so how can something that everyone does truly be harmful?

But get in a roomful of friends talking about everyday struggles, and phone addiction is one of the first things that will come up. We will talk about it more in a later chapter, but if you don't think we all aren't aware of how bound to our phones we've become, you're wrong. We are all talking about it. We just aren't doing much more than that.

The deadly over of overindulging has led to such problems for us—when self mandates standard, the limit is the sky, and the sky is too high. We aren't good at self-regulation. We choose the wrong things and try to make them right. Read Ecclesiastes. Solomon knew because he had tested the theory. Giving in to our temporary wants in light of the treasures of heaven isn't worth it. What we've gotten, most of the time, in return for our liberties is wild dissatisfaction and pain.

OVERWORKING

Several months ago I read a statement online attributed to author and Bible teacher Priscilla Shirer, and it stopped me in my tracks: "Overwork is unbelief."³ It might, at first, be hard for us to make that mind-set leap—shrugging off the lighthearted suggestion from others that we are a workaholic or seeing our online hobby grow into a business we never intended to start—to the thought that our overworking is, in fact, not fully trusting in the promises of God. But would we be overworking if we felt like we were enough, just for who we were—if not to prove something to someone, escape from something, or acquire more out of a desire to gratify self? I know the argument. I could use it myself: *I just love to work*. And it's true. I do. I've worked since

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the minute I turned sixteen and Fishel Swimming Pool Center in Springfield, Missouri, was willing to hire me to test the pH levels in people's pool water. Achievement, creating, and progress all feel good to me, and the work I do now, I believe, is more important, focused, and God-ordained than ever.

But in the face of God asking me to cut some things out of my schedule and my subsequent fear that my lesser work production could result in disappointment to other people, He prompted this question: *Do you really want to be known as the woman who can produce?* I know well from working with leaders that burnout is sneaky; it comes on slowly but shuts things down immediately. We can see much clearer a God-ask to subtract negative things from our lives, but God's protection is often in asking us to cut out good things we don't see silently causing damage. As I considered God's question, I had to face the fact that at the core I was putting my work over trust and belief in Him. And I had to decide. As much as I love to work, I don't want to be known as the woman who can produce. That's an empty tagline with an expiration date of how long I'll be able to do so. I want to be known as a woman who follows Jesus, no matter what. In that tagline is a promise of longevity. Better for you and me to disappoint people than overwork ourselves into unwellness, as we've been at times apt to do. We would all do better to focus on the real work of becoming more like Christ and let Him birth and facilitate (and manage) healthy workflow from there. Sanctification over production every single day of the week.

I could list a bunch of statistics to prove to you we work too much, but we already know. We know because we have carpal tunnel from typing. We know because of the sales volume of those anti-strain glasses that protect our eyes from all the time we put in looking at computer screens. We know because we've been too busy with work to hang out with our kids, and now they're older and too busy for us. We know because we haven't had a decent vacation in years. We know because our overworked minds don't allow us a good night's rest.

Work is a precious, good thing, and we've often abused it. I'm not sure we even know how to do it balanced anymore because it's become such a part of our culture to burn the candle at both ends. I asked my friend Alli not long ago if there was a way to know if you work too much because, as you already know from reading, I struggle with that myself. Hard workers can become workaholics, content creators can become discontented, and influencers can become influenced by the need to produce before we know it, so Alli's wisdom was important: "When it becomes about you trying to earn worth through your work, you know it's gone too far." She added, "When the people around you that love you start telling you it's too much, it's too much." Such simple but solid and powerful litmus tests to go by.

I don't know what deadly overs are threatening to derail your Jesus-first life, but if you look at the root of your life complications, you'll find the answer. What's at the core of the issues you spend the most time cleaning up? Is it because of your overapologizing or overexplaining? Are your messes due to your overindulgences or overworking? Are you overanalyzing your situation, and your mind is a mess? I propose this with deep understanding: Jesus wasn't over everything in your life, or it wouldn't have been so.

LONGING FOR HOME

I never got the simple life I wanted.

I've been thinking about it a lot, thinking back to the simpler days when I was six. I didn't know much then about real life—about the highs and lows, the successes and failures. I just knew how to play. And cuddle kittens. And dream. And love Jesus. As much as I wish I could go back to that place where I didn't know about real life, I can't. And if I had, I would have missed out on the journey, so I don't truly want to.

What I want now is to have a beautiful, meaningful life that feels

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full and free. For Jesus to use me. I want the same things you want. Peace. Good food. Laughter. To feel loved and known and cared for. And there's something else. Even though I have a beautiful house and a family to spend my days with, I still live with a somewhat curious hunger for home. My friend and author Lore Wilbert said it best:

We are born homesick, every one of us. We who live in this fractured world have eternity written on our hearts; we are longing to be home and are digging the tent pegs of our lives in as deep as we can get them until we arrive on eternity's shores.⁴

It's true. No matter how good a life we have, we will always long for our real home. It makes sense. We will never be satisfied here because this is not the home God made us for.

It is no wonder, then, that we struggle to live with the realities of our situation on earth: a complicated life made more complicated by the choices we make, often ruled by the flesh we want so desperately to die to. Bless us. It is a situation we all are in.

But it is not a situation without hope. God doesn't work that way.

In this life, the life where there will be trouble, there is also choice. The next eight chapters are dedicated to daily choices that support our Jesus-over-everything lifestyle, and my prayer is that with God's help you will find them more relatable, doable, and even delightful than you may think. There's nothing you can't do with Jesus. Now's a chance for you to put that belief into action.

To do this, you'll need to see your *deadly overs* (that is, *you* over Jesus) and Jesus-over-everything as two opposing lifestyles, and you'll have to decide which one you want. The way of life (aka the land of the *deadly overs*) that puts you in charge is guaranteed to stay complicated. You will keep overdoing it, keep picking the wrong over, and will have to live with the repercussions. I won't lie; it will often be the easier choice in the moment. And it's possibly the one

you're most used to (I speak from experience). But it will have hidden problems, and it won't bring you the simplicity of good things you truly want in the end.

On the other hand, the Jesus-over-everything lifestyle (visualize this as the beautiful, fruitful opposing land) comes with a different kind of guarantee. If you choose to put Jesus in His place of pre-eminence, He will bless your life. He will sort out things that you've never been able to sort out before. He will do a perfect job at managing the imperfect life you haven't been capable of managing on your own. If that sounds good to you, I would just ask you to dive in and read this book to the end for the full picture.

Let's choose the Jesus-over-everything life, together, and as we do, imperfect as it will be, I'm praying that the Lord will guide us. I'm asking Him to point out the pitfalls and awaken us to the scorpions waiting to sting and help us keep our eyes on the land where we've chosen to live, never looking at the other land we think is better because Satan, in that moment, is using some kind of filter to brighten up those weeds.

I know that, right now, the thought of Jesus over everything may seem overwhelming or simply aspirational. What does that even look like? How is it possible in our day-to-day and practical situations? If Jesus is our everything, we have to put Him over all things, and we have plenty of opportunities to live out that kind of life daily. We've already determined that living in the land of the deadly overs has made our lives more complicated than it needs to be, so don't mentally complicate the Jesus-over-everything lifestyle right off the bat. It's actually quite simple. Life is about choice, and you're already making choices, every day. You just may just need to make some different ones. Every chapter we dive into from now until the end of the book will be daily lifestyle choices that either support the Jesus-over-everything lifestyle or move us away from it, and they are plain and simple. Real over pretty. Love over judgment. Holiness over freedom. Service over

spotlight. Steady over hype. Wisdom over knowledge. Honesty over hiding. Commitment over mood.

In every chapter we will break these ideas down practically, to see what they can look like in our everyday life. We will talk about these things to help us see what the Jesus-over-everything decision is, how a Jesus-over-everything life is well within our ability to live, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and I will point you to some Scripture to help along the way. Jesus wouldn't have told us to put Him first if He wasn't willing to help us with the execution. The good news I'm telling you is this: you can absolutely live this kind of life.

And in all of this, I'm reminded of the famous verse, Joshua 24:15: "Choose today whom you will serve," and Joshua's own determination: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (ESV). You may have seen this verse seven hundred times on a laser-cut wooden sign and eight thousand times in a fancy font on a coffee mug, but don't miss the bigger meaning. Joshua wasn't making a statement for the back of a marriage ceremony bulletin. He was using his leadership to plead with a promise-breaking group of Israelites to do something new and radical for a change: to take their spiritual lives in a new direction. He was recapping God's goodness, just as Moses had done (in the book of Deuteronomy) before him. He was reminding them of the only way their lives would work from that point forward even as they lived in the blessed promised land.

Through Joshua, God was pointing out that even after all he had done, they had still chosen the other, less livable land. "With your very own eyes you saw what I did. Then you lived in the wilderness for many years" (v. 7). If I could offer my pedestrian paraphrase for the sake of the context of our conversation, it would be this: "You put Me over everything and saw how well that worked, and then you went back to that other land and put yourself back over Me, and it all fell to pieces."

And in a place of choice, once again, God asked them which land looked better and where they wanted to be.

THE LAND OF THE DEADLY OVERS

Having experienced life in both lands, they knew.

“But the people answered Joshua, saying, ‘We are determined to serve the LORD’” (v. 21).⁵

And with that, Joshua tells them the way.

“‘All right then,’ Joshua said, ‘destroy the idols among you, and turn your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel’” (v. 23).

It is where we, too, begin.

TWO

REAL OVER PRETTY

THEIR JOY WILL BE IN DOING WHAT'S
RIGHT AND BEING THEMSELVES, AND
NOT IN BEING AFFIRMED BY OTHERS.

—GALATIANS 6:4 TPT

I never met Luke Lang. But his words have consumed my thoughts for the better part of the day.

His last post on Facebook was on April 17, 2019.¹

We are home!!

We were released from the hospital this afternoon.

The doctor decided we couldn't do anything in the hospital that we couldn't do at our house, and the food is better. We didn't argue. It's good to be home.

My oncologist and the team from Duke have put together a plan for my next step.

We start a new chemo treatment Monday with some aggressive drugs that will require constant hydration.

The secret weapon is a drug used for extreme lymphoma

and leukemia. I will bring home a lovely infusion pump so drugs will be pumping into me 24 hours a day. There is the possibility of some pretty dangerous side effects.

This HAS to work in order for us to go to Duke.

This is the last resort . . . that's the report.

We have cried a lot today.

We have cried out a lot.

We are crying out for a miracle.

We are crying out for resurrection.

It's time.

We want something to happen that no human can do.

That would be cool.

Five days later, Facebook reported, Luke died. Two hours and six months' worth of posts after I stumbled onto the whole situation, I emerged, wet-eyed and wishing I had met this man.

I was drawn to his wit in the face of the cancer dragon.

I was drawn to his real in the midst of social-media hair ads and smiling selfies and pictures of vacations we all save up a year for that never last long enough.

That day, especially, I'd seen all that enough. I didn't feel like riding the Christian inspiration wave, didn't feel like hearing an attagirl, didn't feel like a lecture in some Instagram post about how butter and cheese are going to kill me. I craved more of Luke's real even though he was now gone, so I went back in the archives: April 5, 2019.

AHOY and OWWIEE!

ARGHH!

This week has kicked me in the face, and gut, and pretty much every other body part.

I was given some NASTY new chemo drugs this week. I was warned.

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I was told that the seas were about to get rocky.

I've been really weak.

The steroids have made my face look like a redfish.

My brain is as foggy as a murky old spyglass.

I've had a lot of fluids this week . . . I mean A LOT!

We discovered yesterday that I've retained twelve pounds of fluids.

I was sloshing when I walked and I was starting to look like the stay puft marshmallow [*sic*] man.

I'm now on a magic pill that causes me to go to the bathroom every eight minutes.

My legs have been very wobbly. I mentioned that earlier this week, I've had some very near and dear Pirate partners . . . to help me navigate my wobbly course. [They sent me] a very sweet walking stick. I'm not surprised, they are among many of the epic crew that have helped keep things steady during this journey. I'm so grateful.

Now sorry, but I've got to go pee AGAIN!

Post after post like that for months since his diagnosis. Some serious and poignant. Some dripping with sarcasm and talking about his new realities with nausea and pureed food. Most talking about Jesus. All of them fiercely real.

There is something refreshing about a person who shows us the real side of life, even if it's oversharing about his need to pee.

In this community of real we feel less alone. It is what all of us long to feel.

The good, the bad, the ugly, the complicated feelings, and all the mess that goes through our heads as we sort through it make us feel understood in our humanity. Some people keep things to themselves, and that doesn't make them any less real, maybe just more private.

But sharing the real stuff is a gift we offer to each other because it is something we need and crave. So it wouldn't be bad to push ourselves a bit.

In today's culture our internal personal battles are over whether to pretty up our real. Self-preservation is constantly on the forefront of our minds. Will we be acceptable just as we are? Or do we need a cleaned-up version for people to love us? Our real is offensive, even to us at times, and we are well aware that it could run some people off. It has before. We've been left alone after showing people who we are. It might not have had a thing to do with us. But we assume the correlation and silently vow never to show all our cards again.

But real is what makes us live without a facade or the complication of having to wonder if people accept the true us. Real is what changes people. It is what makes them decide they are willing to give Jesus a try. Real is what makes a story preach us a lifestyle sermon that sticks. Real heals us on a day that everything seems too perfect for us to fit in.

Real is what made me wish I'd known Luke.

JESUS WASN'T PRETTY

I didn't know until I was older that Jesus wasn't a mirror image of that tall, dark, and handsome man with the well-groomed facial hair who hung on our family room wall in a gold-framed picture for years when I was growing up. It's a picture my mind grapples with even today—the idea that He likely wasn't good-looking enough to be TV's next bachelor.

The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus looked like when He walked this earth, but scholars have done their best to piece it together. Scripture we do have that supports His everyday-man look (“he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him,” Isaiah 53:2 *ESV*) helps us conclude He wasn't the

world's standard of physically attractive. It's hard for us not to imagine the tall, good-looking Jesus walking around, with people swooning at the mere sight. But it's not the case. Based on skeletal remains of first-century Jews, archaeologists have deduced that the average build of a male during the time of Jesus' public ministry was five foot one, 110 pounds. I hate to break the news if you didn't already realize it: Jesus wasn't pretty.²

Not in the worldly sense, that is, based on good looks.

Everything about His coming to earth was purposeful and specific, so this, too, must have been part of God's sovereign plan.

Perhaps if He had been attractive, we would make this the reason He drew so many people to Him or use it to explain the dedication of His followers. Perhaps then we would have felt as if He had a leg up on us regular people, who have flaws, things we believe require a filter, and it would have distanced us from Him.

Jesus drew people in because He was real, and that is the real attractiveness. Our true appeal will always be our truth lived out. To live a Jesus-over-everything life, we go to the core of why we follow Him to begin with: who He is, what He stood for, what drives His heart. While He walked this earth, He never tried to be anyone He wasn't. He never changed His truth to fit in. The strategy of heaven

Jesus drew people in because He was real, and that is the real attractiveness. Our true appeal will always be our truth lived out.

in God coming to earth in the form of His Son was not to gain popularity but to save souls from themselves. The cross wasn't pretty. It was brutal, humbling, and holy. It was real. What it does to change us, still today, is just as real.

We don't need to make ourselves look any better or keep up with some standard of attractiveness the world sets. This is the cause of so much of our wounding. My fashion consultant speaker/friend you read about in chapter 1, Shari, calls these *beauty wounds*, and I can think of plenty of mine, self-inflicted

and otherwise. Trying to be skinny all my life has about killed me. Wishing I had fuller lips and prettier legs is something on which I've spent too much mental energy. Comments made by high school boys that I've never forgotten—even another woman who was supposed to be my friend but made a point to let me know we couldn't share clothes because she was smaller—these are marks that bore deep below the skin and stayed.

What we all need is to change our definition of what is truly worthy and attractive—being who we are and who we were meant to be, flaws and all. This evergreen message of identity is one we will always preach because humans will forever need it. But it's time to grow out of our obsession with ourselves and pursue identity with God, who created us, who cannot contradict His very nature to be exactly who He is. Self-focus has broken us in our reluctance to lift our gaze.

Jesus may not have been physically beautiful, but there is none more beautiful we could ever know. In His example we find our own guidebook for the attractive life we seek.

- He had beautiful strength.
 - He was tempted and didn't give in to it: “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15 NKJV).
- He had beautiful self-control.
 - He denied himself in order to do what God wanted: “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42 NKJV).
- He had a beautiful witness.
 - He developed a respectable reputation: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52 NKJV).

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- He was beautifully gracious.
 - He was humble:
Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:5–8 NKJV)

- He was beautifully bold.
 - He took His appointment seriously and spoke the truth:
For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time, for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle—I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying—a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (1 Timothy 2:5–7 NKJV)

- He was beautifully honest.
 - He cried and was real before God:
Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:7–8 NKJV)

- He was a beautiful leader.
 - He was the ultimate example and went first:
This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become

High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.
(Hebrews 6:19–20 NKJV)

- He was beautifully empathetic and kind.
 - He could have pulled rank, but he didn't:

Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:14–17 NKJV)

All of these beautiful, true things about Jesus are what make Him real. They are what make Him trustworthy and worth following. They are why Jesus deserves to be first in the priority order of things and why being real is so important for us, that we would follow in the footsteps of the greatest role model we will ever know. We won't ever measure up to Jesus. But we are called to walk in His example. And that means choosing not to be pretty and dress ourselves up but to come real.

For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps:

“Who committed no sin,
Nor was deceit found in His mouth”;

who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. (1 Peter 2:21–24 NKJV)

CHOOSE REAL

Right now the front shrubs that hug the front steps of my house like brackets look like my eyebrows: uneven. I'm more than a little embarrassed by both.

I'll get around to trimming the shrubs, but the eyebrows are a bit more of a sensitive subject than you might think. I never realized it until some professional head shots came back and to my horror, my eyebrows appeared to be in different time zones. At my age, it is not nearly as much fun as it used to be to take promotional pictures—the creases, lines, and spots are harder to hide. I don't want my picture taken. I can live with it, but only if my photographer is liberal with the editing.

After the initial shock and disappointment over a silly first-world-vanity/insecurity problem that is still humanly real, I spent some time with God. I know He will deal with me in the way He needs, not necessarily the way I want, and the first thing I have to come to grips with is that this is not about my stupid eyebrows.

It is about how I've been sucked into a societal mind-set that I must look as perfect as I can, so I am relevant in this beauty culture, where attractive people are rewarded with people listening to them. I've read the studies. I know that pretty people get further, have more clout, and, in this social media age, attract far more followers. It's hard not to get sucked into this social media bias nonsense that does exist.

I'll tell you something else real. The morning I had my picture taken was a hard one for me, and it showed on my face. I had heard bad news from home and had dealt with, perhaps, my most difficult parenting issue in twenty-one years. After two hours of sleep the night before, I woke up in a hotel room in another city and did the best I could to get ready for three back-to-back speaking sessions—and a photo shoot—with the lighting in a Fairfield Inn. My makeup fell short of covering the real me—the hurting me.

Looking at these pictures now, I admit that the crooked eyebrows are a silly nothing reminding me that, try as I may and pretty as I attempt to be, fake doesn't work. It's always going to be a no-go on perfection. None of us escape life without flaw. Behind every smiling moment, there are things happening that only God knows about and weeps over, and the pressure we put on ourselves to be amazing in the midst too often stifles necessary personal lament. I spent the whole blessed photo shoot with a cry-lump in my throat but a fantastic smile—and only one of those things was real.

I'm not saying we shouldn't sometimes hold it together. Sometimes, for a time, we have to. I'm saying to let those few-and-far-between moments remind us that at the end of the day, real may not be pretty, but it beautifully saves our hearts.

I wish someone had told me when I was a young woman that I could be real with the way I felt about my body and learn to love the size it was instead of trying so many damaging ways to keep it impossibly small.

I wish someone had told me I could be real about how hurt I was over church people gossiping about my family when my dad lost his church and was all over the news, instead of my developing a hard shell to make me tough so I didn't have to feel things.

I wish someone had told me I could be the real, feisty me and that it was good, not bad or too much for people to handle because that's what I believed all those years, despite my mother's love and approval

(thankful for a good one), constantly trying to stifle a personality God gave me. When I was growing up, the church I knew wasn't as open as it is today to assertively gifted women.

Most of all I wish I had understood what scholar N. T. Wright said: "The authenticity that really matters is living in accordance with the genuine human being God is calling you to become."³ I didn't know how to be me because I misunderstood the process of *becoming*. Too often the unfinished us is blind to what the Spirit-shaped us can be over time. Lies have felt true, damning, and permanent. We aren't weak for falling for them. We are human. But we need to put the truth of Jesus over them now.

I don't want you to go on believing any untrue things, like I have, so let me say it to you: real is the best pretty because it doesn't ask you to lie. Besides the fact that Jesus created us to be the real us, things get complicated when we try to live our life making it all look pretty; it's exhausting and discouraging to the rest of us who need someone, like Luke, to be real—about how hard the cancer is—about how adoptions

Real is the best pretty because it doesn't ask you to lie.

aren't all roses even though we adore those babies, about how sometimes we don't want to put a bow on the end of our doubt or lament.

It is hard as humans not to want to put our best faces forward, but it's far harder to spend a lifetime (or any amount of time) in pursuit of being loved and wanted for how we appear. I have lived long enough to learn this the hard way: if the goal in life is to be liked and accepted by everyone, welcome to a life of exhaustion. There might be nothing more detrimental to a soul (think: a deadly over) than daily overanalyzing how we appear to others and overworking to control it. Choosing real over pretty is choosing to free our souls from the grip of an overfocus on self—something that is the root cause of most of our distresses.

It also frees us to do what God created us to do—*be* who He created us to be, and this is our number-one lifework. Chasing pretty—curating

a life appealing to everyone else—is at odds with why we are even here. I suspect this is why a lot of us stay wildly unfulfilled. We feel cornered into a contrived, half-baked, or even false persona we must keep up. What an exhausting way to live. It is the life of complication. Being real is a gift we give to others, yes, but it is also a gift we give ourselves. It releases us to be simple. We get to be who we are.

My daughter came home not long ago and told me a way her own version of this truth has released her, without knowing it was an experiment in real over pretty at all. It was the end of her sophomore year, and she was trying out for a coveted spot on the school media team, something she had looked forward to for years. It's a hard gig to land, and she was nervous. She had to make a video of herself talking, answering questions she didn't know in advance, and at the same time, skillfully acting natural. For a perfectionistic, hard-on-herself human, this was a combustible cocktail of not so easy to do.

“Be yourself,” she whispered to herself before take 1, which came out in an unpolished, slightly clunky, but friendly and relaxed version of herself. *It's almost good enough*, she thought before trying again to make it better. Take 2 went off without a hitch, this version better than the first with respect to poise and word precision and overall performance. She was pleased and just about to delete the first version when a debate began inside her: *Do I put the more polished version of my submission forward, or do I submit the version where I am more myself?* Seconds later, quickly and before she could talk herself out of it, she hit delete on take 2—the polished take. She had decided that if she was to be chosen for the team, it would be because she was chosen for being *her*. As she told me this story, I smiled because I knew it was a precious good step on a lifelong road to self-acceptance victory for my girl—something many of us wish we had learned far earlier in life.

Staring down the fear that we won't be chosen if people know the real us is incredibly powerful. It is a precedent to start now, even if

you're reading this at sixty-five years old and have never tried it before. The real us, who God made us to be—flaws, mistakes, bruises and all—is a mighty force for people to come to know Him. Choosing real is choosing Jesus because it's trusting His creative instincts that we were made good.

**Choosing real
is choosing
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made good.**

Over and over again in the Word, Jesus speaks to us about how he chooses the real us. This from the One who knows the down and dirty. Let us not grow numb to stories like the one about the woman at the well, a woman who didn't have the right background and had dually not lived perfect—two big strikes for someone

like Jesus to have anything to do with her. Quick to point out what to the Sovereign was already obvious, she said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?" (John 4:9). Jesus spoke into her real need and at the same time quenched *her* thirst—a thirst she didn't even know she had. Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (vv. 13–14 NIV).

We are all thirsty with the human need to be seen and validated, just like the woman at the well. Sometimes we know we are thirsty, but we can't pinpoint the exact place from which the thirst comes. Trial and error to quench the thirst is often met with dissatisfaction, but God is always dead-on. If Jesus had met us like He did the woman at the well, He would have encountered imperfect backgrounds and backstories and a lifetime of trying to figure out the best way not to let those things show. And we, too, would be refreshed by something far deeper than the physical water we drink, drinking in the endless supply of Jesus, who gives us the real thing: Himself.

The story of Zacchaeus, aka the wee little man from the tree (if you attended vacation Bible school as a kid), is another one not to gloss

over. No one liked Zacchaeus—of that, his job as chief tax collector made sure. I'm taking liberties here, but I imagine him as annoyingly obnoxious—the one who butted in to lines, talked too loud, knew it all, and outdid every story—that guy no one wanted to be around. Maybe he hid his real behind his wealth and power. Maybe no one got to see his true self. Or maybe his real wasn't appealing to most people, and for the first time Someone gave him a chance, despite the fact that he wasn't all that great. What we know from the story is what happened after Jesus said he was going to Zacchaeus's house: something changed in the man's heart.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:1–10 NIV)

This is what Jesus does so beautifully: He inspires us to rise to the people He created us to be by loving and accepting us just as we are. Name something more real than that. Where we are living below the

potential He intends, He doesn't shame us into more; He motivates it. No one can get us to do the things Jesus can because no one has the power of conviction and the credibility in action that He holds. There's

We may have hidden our real our whole lives, but one encounter with God and we can be inspired not only to be honest about who we are but also to change where we need to change.

simply no equal by which we are moved to transform an entire way of thought or history. Only by Him, the Creator, Sustainer, and Savior of the universe, with His unmatched, proven track record.

Zacchaeus's response to Jesus was radical transformation. He

became a man of generosity, benevolence, restoration, and humility simply because Jesus took an interest in him and became his friend. Never doubt the effect Jesus can have on your life or the life of another. We may have hidden our real our whole lives, but one encounter with God and we can be inspired not only to be honest about who we are but also to change where we need to change.

And finally let's look at the story told in John 8 about the woman caught in sin and about to be stoned, whose *real* was going to get her killed.

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up

and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?”

“No one, sir,” she said.

“Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.” (vv. 1–11 NIV)

Time and again, He’s saying to us through these and other stories: *I choose you, just as you are. You don’t have to be pretty or pretend in front of Me. I already know.* Make no mistake: there’s accountability in the John 8 story, just as in every story like it where Jesus heals, loves, accepts first, and then makes the path of holiness and next steps clear (“Go now and leave your life of sin,” v. 11 NIV). There are bigger contextual pictures to this story, but the summation for us, as humans, remains the same: If God accepts our real self, there is no one left to matter. We don’t get prettier before we come to God; we get more stripped down, humble, and repentant. One is born of performance. The other is born of truth.

And I know: sometimes we fear being real because we aren’t in a place where we are representing Jesus well, and our real might be detrimental. With real lives on the line for eternity, that’s something to get worked out, and Jesus will help with that, often in ways we don’t prefer but that are necessary. Sometimes we have to get wrecked to get real. If you’re there, don’t despise it. God intends it for good, all the way around. Lift your chin. There’s beauty to this. Often after a wrecking is a reckoning and a reuniting. Jesus is worth the loss of everything you know deep down isn’t sustainable but hate to let go.

JESUS OVER EVERYTHING

Let Him prove that to you even as that veneer you've spent your life creating breaks down before your eyes.

Whether it be in your life or in the life of someone else—watch the trend of crisis. It tells us what matters most. No one cares about anything pretty when something hard comes up. People innately know things will crumble under a glossy facade. The first thing to go in a moment of real trouble is social media, the thing in our daily life we think we can't live without: "I'm taking a break to deal with some things and work on myself." Because scrolling, online articles, and YouTube videos entertain us, but they don't help us sort out our lives. They're novocaine: temporary, but they don't heal deep places in our heart. Real conversations in small groups that dig junk out can do that. People sharing their raw and hard truths and, yes, sometimes even good old Facebook can produce that in a gem like Luke Lang, who will pop up in a scroll and take your breath away by his refusal to hide his raw and real.

About Luke. I would have stopped reading if he had tried to make cancer look prettier than it is. I walked through it closely enough with my dear friend Jennifer to get an education in its brutality, firsthand. Sugarcoating the real stuff that bonds us in our humanity robs us of community. I've watched what happens when twelve women are sitting around and I ask "what is the greatest need of your heart right now?" and a woman's guard comes down, and she uses words like "I'm scared" or "I feel forgotten;" then there's the gorgeous ripple effect of real that her words produce in others who feel safe enough to admit they feel the same.

May people get this gift from us.

Choosing pretty has led to insecurity and self-focus. Choosing real has led to freedom.

Choosing pretty has shown people a facade, with hollow result. Choosing real has impacted people's lives, sometimes for eternity.

Choosing real is living a Jesus-over-everything life.

LUKE LANG, FACEBOOK, MARCH 21, 2019: _____

Purée.

During my last hospital stay I got some fun, culinary news.

The Doctor put me on a purée diet for at least a month.

That means everything has to be soft, real soft.

Purée means to liquify solid food.

Everything I eat has to be creamy or pasty.

I can't have crunchy, which is sad because I love crunchy.

HELLO TACOS!!

There are some things that are naturally soft, things that I'm fond of like ice cream and gravy.

I've consumed a lot of pudding and yogurt.

I'm alright with all of that.

I've needed some help with the rest.

My amazing, super resourceful sister sent me some preassembled purée.

She found cans of mushy BBQ Beef and boxes of fun food items.

I get amazon boxes full of precooked kindness . . .

I save a ton of time at mealtime because I don't have to chew.

Here's something I've been chewing onto today . . .

I have realized that in the last several months God has puréed my heart.

He has softened my heart.

"I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh."—Ezekiel 11:19 [esv]

JESUS OVER EVERYTHING

I have been exposed to a whole new world . . . a circle of suffering. My heart has softened as I have seen others hurt, walk with compassion, and cling to hope.

I have gotten to know my friend, the Holy Spirit, like never before. He walks with me, I hear His voice, I feel His tender touch. I have truly fallen in love with Him like never before. He gives me courage and creativity.

I'm different as the result of disease.

I cry a lot these days . . .

It's not because of the pain.

It's because my heart has been puréed.

Rest in peace, Luke.

Thanks for leaving us with your real.

JESUS OVER EVERYTHING MANIFESTO

Real over Pretty: When we want to look perfect, we fight to be ourselves.

Love over Judgment: When we feel judgmental, we choose love.

Holiness over Freedom: When we could say yes but it won't make us more like Jesus, we say no instead.

Service over Spotlight: When we want attention, we lift up someone else.

Steady over Hype: When the world tries to influence us, we continually go to the Word.

Honesty over Hiding: When we want to lie, we out the secret to take away its power.

Wisdom over Knowledge: When we are tempted to rely on books or outside inspiration to be our best teacher, we ask God to make us wise instead.

Commitment over Mood: When we want to run, we stay.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1: THE LAND OF THE DEADLY OVERS

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CHAPTER 2: REAL OVER PRETTY

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LISA WHITTLE is the author of seven books, and her wit and bold bottom-line approach have made her a sought-after Bible teacher. She is also the creator of a companion video Bible study for *Jesus over Everything*. A pastor's daughter and longtime ministry leader in issues relevant to the church, Lisa is the founder of Ministry Strong and the popular *Jesus over Everything* podcast, which debuted in the top twenty-five of Christian podcasts. Her love runs deep to see people pursue Jesus for life, grow deep roots of faith, and walk strong in the midst of a world that so often seems to have gone crazy.

Lisa has done master's work in marriage and family counseling, advocated for Compassion International, and been featured on numerous media outlets through the years. She and her husband live in North Carolina with their three mostly grown children, who still come home for dinner.

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