

*THE
IMPERFECT
DISCIPLE*

Grace for People Who Can't
Get Their Act Together

JARED C. WILSON



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jared C. Wilson, *The Imperfect Disciple*
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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1895-4

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17 18 19 20 21 22 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Mom and Dad,
who imperfectly but consistently
lived out in front of us
normal, regular, non-weird Christianity.

But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

Matthew 15:25–27

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You Should Probably Read This Introduction

(When You Wonder If This Book Is Worth Reading)

Here's a question I used to ask the people I taught in church: "What comes to mind when you hear the word *discipleship*?"

Some people would play word-association and I'd get a string of adjectives in response: *difficult, trusting, adventurous, obedient*, and so forth.

I don't recall many people thinking too long about the question. Very quickly somebody would offer up the "right answer"—at least, the right answer for our context—"Discipleship means following Jesus."

Well, yeah.

Christian discipleship does mean following Jesus. It means following Jesus wherever he goes. It means lashing ourselves to him like a sailor in a storm-tossed boat might lash himself to the mast.

When church people say, “Discipleship means following Jesus,” I think they tend to picture a group of suntanned dudes in cantata-quality robe costumes peacefully strolling through green pastures, perhaps stopping here and there under the comfortable shade of a tree to watch Jesus smile at them and tousle the hair of precocious children scampering about at his Birkenstocked feet.

Or maybe I’m just cynical.

When I ask, “What comes to mind when you hear the word *discipleship*?” I’d love to hear people answer more along these lines:

“Believing God has a plan for me even when I’m afraid he doesn’t.”

“Believing God loves me even when I feel like nobody else does.”

“Trusting that God is doing something for my good even though my life has always been terrible up till now.”

“Following Jesus even though my feelings speak more loudly.”

“Denying myself in order to do what’s right although I don’t really want to.”

“Imagining a time when I won’t hurt as much as I do now.”

“Imagining a time when my spouse or child won’t hurt as much as they do now.”

You get the idea, I hope. None of those responses really suffices as a definition of *discipleship* like you’d find in a theological dictionary, but they all put more skin on the word, I think.



Sometimes I read books and articles on discipleship and I wonder who in the world they're written for. And then I remember: *Oh, yeah—for people who give the Sunday-school answers in Sunday school but save the real, life-or-death, grasping-for-meaning, gasping-for-breath grappling with God for those rare moments when they're all alone, undistracted, and unable to fend off the crushing sense of their own inadequacies and apprehensions about the world and their place in it.* I tend to think that a lot of the ways the evangelical church teaches discipleship seem designed for people who don't appear to really need it. It's like the über-toned CrossFit junkie who adds a spin class to his weekly schedule, because, well, why not?

I wonder sometimes how all of our steps, tips, and quasi-spiritual “life hacks” come across to the Christian woman who is married to an unbelieving husband completely apathetic to the things of God, to the young Christian whose parents aren't saved and hate that he is, to the husband whose wife seems more interested in Pinterest than in him, to the working-class guys and gals who see through the slick pick-me-ups of the privileged, to the frequently discouraged, the constantly disappointed, and the perennially depressed.

For those of us who have struggled our whole life to get our act together, what does a discipleship built around getting your act together eventually do?

Well, I don't know about you, but it about made me give up.

My gracious publisher, Baker, wanted me to write a book on discipleship. I said, “Okay. But I have one condition: it has to be printed with my blood.”

Naturally, they had some health concerns about that—for me and for you. So I clarified. See, I don't want to write the kind of discipleship book most people are too afraid to say they're sick of. I don't want to write a discipleship book for people who put notches on their Belts of Truth every time they read a discipleship book. I don't want to write about being extreme or radical or taking it to the limit or maxing out your potential or reaching the stars or drinking cloud-juice or whatever.

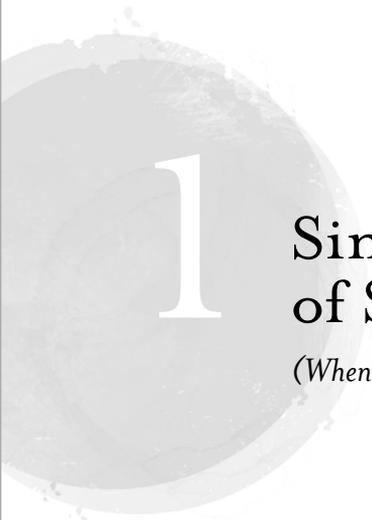
I want to write a discipleship book for normal people, for people like me who know that discipleship means following Jesus—and we know that following Jesus is totally worth it, because Jesus is the end-all, be-all—but we often find that following Jesus takes us to some pretty difficult places.

I want to write a book for the Christians whose discipleship has gotten them a little bloody.

So I said, “How about a book on discipleship for people who don't feel saved each morning until they've had at least two cups of coffee? How about a book on following Jesus for the guy or gal sitting there in small group always wondering if it's safe to say what they're thinking? For the sake of the cut-ups and the screwups, the tired and the torn-up, the weary and the wounded—how about we demystify discipleship?”

And they said, astonishingly, “Okay.”

So here you have it, in your cold little hands. This book on following Jesus is for all of you people who, like me, are tired of the mass-marketed, self-helpy “be a better Christian” projects. It's not printed with my blood, but I did bleed on the pages a little bit.



1

Sin and the Art of Soul Maintenance

(When You Can't Get Your Act Together)

In short, I am a riddle to myself;
a heap of inconsistency.

John Newton¹

My gospel is a little sweaty and ragged around the edges. The print is smeared a little bit, and it's flat and conformed to the contour of my upper thigh from hiding in my front pocket. Maybe your gospel looks like mine. Sometimes it can feel weird to show it to somebody.

When I was in the ninth grade I lived in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and every day during that freshman year I walked home from school with my friend Steve. We had to walk a long way from El Dorado High School along Juan Tabo Boulevard before reaching the turnoff to our neighborhood. Steve was short and round; I was tall and skinny. We looked like a teenage Abbot and Costello ambling down the sidewalk. We

were the frequent victims of drive-by shouting. We'd laugh about it, usually, because it was often difficult to make out the substance of this verbal abuse, thanks to the Doppler effect and the generally loud traffic noise on the street. But mainly I recall our sexuality being questioned.

One day, somebody threw a Ziploc baggie of water at us. Not a water balloon. A Ziploc baggie full of water. Steve got hit in the back. He was a pretty good sport about it, honestly. After it—splat!—smacked him square between the shoulder blades, it plopped unbroken onto the sidewalk. We stared at it for a few seconds. A baggie of water? Who *does* that?

Whenever we made it to the turnoff into the neighborhood, we had about fifteen more minutes of walking before we split off for our respective homes. Once we'd cleared the *American Ninja Warrior* course of Juan Tabo, those fifteen minutes were really the only uninterrupted time of talking we had on our journey home. We usually spent them talking about Arnold Schwarzenegger movies or rap music. I usually also spent them trying to figure out how to talk to Steve about Jesus.

I kept this tract in my pocket. And every day I thought about how to bring it out and explain its contents to Steve. But there never seemed to be an ideal opening in the conversation. You can't talk about *Predator* and *The Running Man* and somehow smoothly transition into the Romans Road. Still more difficult is this transition from Steve waxing enthusiastic about "The Humpty Dance." I mean, I wanted to, but I couldn't figure out how to get from being called "fags" by some stupid meat-head with his stupid meat-head face hanging out the window of his stupid meat-head El Camino, or having a baggie of water thrown at us, to God having a wonderful plan for Steve's life.

So the tract stayed put, for months on end.

Let me back up a bit. Because to understand my anxiety and apprehension about evangelizing the bejeezus out of Steve on these walks home, you have to understand how I'd been trained to evangelize—how I'd been *discipled*.

I grew up in the eighties attending a relatively normal Baptist church. The church was neither very traditional nor very modern. It was your run-of-the-mill, slacks-on-Sunday-morning and jeans-on-Sunday-night evangelical congregation. The gospel of Jesus was there and every sinner heard it—every sinner, that is, except those who'd already heard it. The idea that grace was for Christians too was somewhat of a foreign concept; grace was Christianity 101. Once you had God's grace, you had to move on to bigger things, to what we called "deeper" things, things like charts of the end-times and pledging abstinence until marriage. (I really hoped I'd be able to get married and have sex before Jesus returned, which might tell you a little something about how poorly we'd been pitched the concept of Christ's glorious second coming.)

Grace got me into God's family. I walked an aisle when I was five or six, was quickly baptized thereafter, said the sinner's prayer a second time when I was twelve just for good measure, and was rebaptized at fifteen to make extra sure. I had that grace in my pocket, sure enough. But it was pretty clear that now I was sort of hanging on by a thread. And as a neurotic, sinful, messed-up kid, I felt like I was constantly dangling over hellfire.

There were endless checklists and progress charts tracking my growth in the Christian life. By the time I got to junior high school, I was committed to looking like the best

Christian kid I could be. This is a hard place to be if you're not exactly sure Jesus loves you, or even *likes* you. I kind of felt like I was a Christian only because the Bible says "God is love," and so if I signed on the dotted line, he *had* to take me. I was exploiting his own loophole.

By the time I reached the ninth grade, I had already sensed a calling into vocational ministry, which only intensified my commitment to playing the part of a good religious kid. And this is what made ninth-grade Sunday school so excruciating. Every Sunday morning, at the start of class, our teacher would ask us who we'd witnessed to the previous week. Most of us, I'm convinced, just made up our evangelistic encounters. Brave souls would say "nobody" and offer some kind of excuse. But the bottom line was if you weren't witnessing, you probably weren't even saved yourself.

At the time, I had no framework for "witnessing" beyond the evangelistic sales pitch we'd all been encouraged to engage in since childhood, the same kind of sales pitch that roped us into the faith ourselves. "Witnessing" wasn't really about bearing witness to others about the grace of God in your life; it wasn't even about telling somebody the good news, really. It was about getting somebody to admit they were a sinner and then somehow getting them to pray a formulaic prayer. I like to call this "closing the deal."

My Sunday school teacher was like the *Glengarry Glen Ross* of evangelism, and we were to Always. Be. Closing.

Well, I'm sorry, but I was a terrible closer. Heck, I was a terrible *opener*.

I dreaded going to Sunday school and not being able to answer for why I hadn't witnessed to anybody and why I was a terrible Christian who deserved to live in the cruddy "We

Had to Let Them in Here Because They Prayed the Sinner’s Prayer” section of heaven for all eternity.

I grew weary from the good works I wasn’t doing.

Finally, one Friday on our walk home from school, after Steve and I made the turnoff from Juan Tabo into our neighborhood, I spent the ensuing fifteen minutes working up the courage to witness to him. Then, when it came time for us to part ways, I reached into my pocket, pulled out that damp little gospel, and held it out to him. I quickly said, “Hey, will you read this? I have to say at church that I gave it to somebody, so just take it and say you read it. But you don’t really have to if you don’t want to.”

Truly the most compelling invitation to repent and follow Jesus ever delivered.

Steve looked at the thin little tract in my hand. He just sort of shrugged, said “Okay,” and took it.

I had staved off damnation for at least one more week.

What’s Wrong with Me?

I don’t know how to explain my primary personal malfunction except to say that there is constantly a shadow of guilt overlaying my thoughts. I want to take you back to the time I was first baptized, back in that plain vanilla Baptist church when I was five or six years old. I don’t remember much about the experience at all. I don’t remember what I was wearing. I don’t remember anything that was said. I don’t remember going down into the water. I don’t remember coming up. I don’t remember if people clapped or if my mom hugged me afterward. I don’t remember much about it at all. Except! I do remember the moment right before the baptism—quite vividly, in fact.

I was waiting my turn to the right of the baptistery, which was elevated on the front wall of the sanctuary, situated centrally above the choir loft. I was standing on the bare plywood floor that led up to the baptismal steps, behind a wall and out of sight of the congregation, waiting to be invited into the pool. The church was singing whatever hymn preceded the baptisms that day. I don't remember what hymn it was, but I remember the sound of the organ. It was loud and ominous, shaking the thin wooden floor. The walls seemed to vibrate with every note played. The vengeful Spirit of God himself was the wind through those bellows, and I could feel him blowing across my hollow bones to make that thunderous bottle music. I was scared.

That's what I remember thirty-five years later.

In a lot of ways, I have felt haunted by those gale-force tones all my life. And when it comes to my spiritual state, I very often still feel like that little boy—hidden, small, and trembling, waiting on a welcome to come get clean, and finally getting clean by the skin of my teeth.

My “reconversion” at twelve years of age was not much different in tone. We were still attending the same church, having returned to my hometown after a few years away, and somebody decided it'd be a great idea to show those “left behind” movies. Now, I don't mean the recent Kirk Cameron *Left Behind* movies, the terrible ones adapted from those terrible novels. I'm talking about the 1970s Larry Norman—crooning “You've been left beeee-hind” movies, the ones with dudes and dudettes running around in striped kneesocks trying to escape the antichrist's UN (or whatever it was). I'm not sure what exactly was going on in those movies except that the rapture happened and people got

left behind, including people who claimed to be Christians. And in the end, if you decided to take your second chance and *really* get saved this time, you got your head chopped off. The story lines were a little difficult to follow unless you spent your life neck-deep in dispensational premillennialism, but they were honest-to-God frightening to timid souls like my own.

I started having nightmares. I know evangelicals like to joke about discovering nobody's in the house and suspecting "rapture," but this legitimately happened to me a few times. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and check my parents' bedroom to make sure they were still there. I spent a few nights sleeping on their bedroom floor.

Eventually I prayed "the prayer" a second time. Then that second baptism. Wash, rinse, repeat. You could say that I very effectively had the hell scared out of me.

I think back on all of this and the kind of discipleship that came along with it, and honestly it's a wonder I'm not cowering in a corner as I type this very paragraph. But do you know what? It would be a huge mistake to assume that everything that's wrong with me as it pertains to my spiritual temperament and religious sensibilities is the fault of my church upbringing. I know plenty of friends and family raised in this same environment, or church cultures very similar to it, who are just fine and dandy right now. They're confident, self-assured, highly functional, perfectly happy people. (Those jerks.)

But seriously. A lot of what ails me was obviously not helped by the tenor of my adolescent discipleship, but the blame really lies deep inside myself. I was born a spiritually dysfunctional person. I grew up kind of neurotic and

fearful, but my biggest problem isn't anything anybody or any place did to me.

I think of the story (more than likely apocryphal) wherein G. K. Chesterton responded to an article in the *London Times* titled, "What's Wrong with the World?" Apparently, Chesterton did not agree with their conclusions, because he allegedly wrote a letter to the paper in response:

Dear Sir:

Regarding your article "What's Wrong with the World?"

I am.

Yours truly,

G. K. Chesterton

This is all very clever, see, but my man Gilbert Keith got it entirely wrong. He should have written the *London Times* to say, "I'll tell you what's wrong with the world. That imbecile, Jared Wilson." I am confident that if he knew *me*, he would not have so casually suggested himself as the source of all the world's ills.

I have that ominous organ playing inside me. My heart is a haunted house—broken, ramshackle, weathered and boarded-up and filled with the mournful sound of the Hound of Heaven howling through the slats.

I do have my good days, mind you. Quite a lot of them, actually. And most of my days are mixes of good and bad feelings, mostly good. I manage fairly well at keeping it together. I mean, really, I just reread the previous several paragraphs and I guess I should apologize to you for sounding so mooney.

It's just that whenever I actually think about how I'm doing, it doesn't seem as though I'm doing very well at all. In fact, most of the good that I've accomplished in my life and most of the good things that have happened in my life have come nowhere close to fixing what's really going on inside of me.



This is why I resonate with the apostle Paul when he's driving down that Romans Road and decides to turn left on red into Romans chapter 7. I know some scholars argue that Romans 7 is not a description of the Christian life but rather is Paul describing his life before his conversion. Maybe they're right. Or maybe, like Chesterton writing that letter to the *London Times*, they just aren't aware of my existence. Because it sure seems like Paul's got my number. He says, in part:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (Rom. 7:18–23)

My Bible has assigned a subheading to this section of Romans that reads “The Law and Sin.” I would like to modestly propose the editors change that heading to read “Why We Can't Get Our Act Together.”

Paul is careening back and forth between right and wrong, good and bad, holy and unholy. He knows the difference. This is one indication, although a minor one, that he may be speaking to his post-conversion life, as he has elsewhere said that the unsaved don't even understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14) and that the unrighteous aren't wrestling with the truth but *suppressing* it (Rom. 1:18).

Secondly, however, he also indicates that he delights in the law in his inner being (7:22), which is a strange thing to say if he's referring to being lost, even to being a lost "Jew among Jews," since the biblical indictment of self-righteousness is demonstrably that it only delights in the law *behaviorally*—that its "inner being" is, as Jesus says, rotting and dead (Matt. 23:27).

Nevertheless, whether Paul is discussing pre-conversion or post-conversion struggle, I read Romans 7 and think, *Man, Paul, you get me—you really get me*. He's got me nailed here. The good stuff I want to do? I find myself, on the regular, unable (really, unwilling) to do it. The bad stuff I know not to do? I find myself, *tout de suite*, all up in that.

Here's a plainer way to put it: I do things that I know are bad and I avoid doing things that I know are good. This makes me imminently unqualified to write one of those awesome, take-the-next-hill, "be the change you want to see in the world" books on discipleship churned out ever-presently by the evangelical leadership-industrial complex.

But on the other hand, it makes me uniquely and distinctly qualified for the hope Paul offers in response to the crushing predicament bemoaned by Romans 7.

It turns out—and you need to read this closely, so I hereby advise you to actually pull this book closer to your face and

get the following words right in front of your milky little corneas . . . well, not that close; you look like a weirdo.

Hold it up. Read it close. Drink it deep.

It turns out, actually, that—*get this*—Jesus is looking specifically for the people who can't get their act together.

I know, right? I swear I am not making this up!

Paul's sense of hopeless exasperation reaches a crescendo in verse 24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He feels caught, trapped, like the corpse of his old life is still hanging on to his ankle and he can't move on. He's tried pulling himself up by his bootstraps but he got them tangled around his neck and now he's choking to death.

This is exactly the kind of self-despair Jesus is listening for.

"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul says in verse 25, and you can almost hear him panting like a guy just pulled out of the water from drowning.

Every day, I wake up into Romans 7. Every dadgum day. My alarm goes off and I sit up in bed, my uncoffeed consciousness groggily gearing up for sins—both of omission and of commission. I'm engaged in the flesh before I even get my feet on the carpet.

And yet, right there beside me, laid out like the day's outfit for school, are new mercies. Romans 8 lies right there, spooning Romans 7 in a full-size bed, no wiggle room.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.
(Rom. 8:1–3)

How do we get out of this mess? We can't. But God does what we cannot do. So while the storm of Romans 7 rages inside of us, the truth of Romans 8 has us safe and sound. Within the spiritual ecosystem of God's saving sovereignty, in fact, our struggle is like the little squall stirred up in a snow globe.

God is collecting all these little storms. He is doing something beautiful with us and even *in* us and *through* us. This is the great light that overcomes the shadow world of Romans 7. It is the good news for all of us who can't get our act together. We are exactly the kind of people God is looking for. We are exactly the kind of people God is using. We are exactly the kind of people God loves.

What's Wrong with You?

Every day you drift naturally into Romans 7. You don't need any help with that. It's just that your wheels are naturally out of alignment. You're just wobbly, okay? You're going to get where you want to go eventually. So here's what you do.

As early in the day and as often as you can, you turn on the light of Romans 8. You bring Romans 8 into Romans 7 and you say, "Look what I found, everybody!" You're the gal who's brought your fiancé home to meet the family, and it turns out he's a much better catch than anybody, including yourself, ever thought you'd end up with. He's a rich doctor-slash-fighter pilot who spends his summers digging wells for orphans in the Congo or something, okay? And Aunt Bitterness is sitting over there in the corner of the living room stewing away, ready to take you on a trip down angry memory lane, and you're like, "Aunt Bitterness, I'd like you to meet

my fiancé, Dr. Gospel. Isn't he dreamy?" And there's Uncle Lazy sitting at the table medicating his feelings with three Egg McMuffins, and you bring Dr. Gospel over, and Uncle Lazy instantly perks up and realizes how embarrassing he looks in the face of such accomplishment. And there's your twin sister Pride sitting there in the middle of the room, like she owns the place, but when Dr. Gospel walks up to her, she gets up and offers him her seat without a word.

It's a little like that. You introduce the truth of Romans 8 to every corner of the room, every dark place in your heart, as often as you can, as much as you can, as fiercely as you can.

Every day. It has to happen every day. Because what's wrong with you and me is that we're still on this side of glory, and so long as we're on this side of glory, there will always be more sanctifying to go through. I've met some people who think they're all good-and-sanctified already, and I like to tenderly suggest to them that they have much further to go than they realize.

When we die or the Lord returns, whichever comes first, we will be instantly glorified—made like him, like *whoosh*, in the blink of an eye—but until that moment, we're trekking across Romans 7 in a three-legged race with our pride through thigh-deep mud. But Romans 8 turns the boosters on. Romans 8 is like walking on water.

And I don't mean you've got to literally be only drawing from Romans 8. I just mean that the problem Romans 7 highlights—which is echoed throughout the Bible—can only be overcome with the antidote Romans 8 presents—which reverberates throughout the Bible as well.

But this is where Romans 7 and 8 as representatives are quite helpful. They help us diagnose our real dysfunctions.

We are constantly told that our problems are primarily about self-actualization, about success or happiness or just acting right or feeling right. And we definitely have problems with all of these things, but they are not our main problems.

I think, deep down, you probably know this. It's the reason why, try as you might to address all these issues, you never feel quite *fixed*.

Discipleship as Soul Maintenance

You and I need tuning up in the gospel every day.

This is how I like to think about discipleship, then—not just following Jesus, but *refollowing* Jesus every day. We go off track so easily.

When I was pastoring, I much admired the dominant biblical portrait of the pastorate—a shepherd with his flock. But any seasoned ministry veteran will tell you that pastoral ministry is very often less like herding sheep and more like herding cats. The prophet Isaiah says that “all we like sheep have gone astray” (53:6), and I wonder if it's because he wasn't around cats very much. Sheep tend to go astray because they are dumbly distracted. That's a little like us. But cats go astray because they are smug investors in their own narcissistic autonomy. That's a lot like us.

Then you put us on this confusing, twisty journey called life, and there's just so much that can go wrong. It especially goes wrong when we aren't clear on exactly what's wrong. Do you know why there are a thousand fresh self-help books every year? It's because they don't work. We keep looking for the answer within us, as if we'll find it in the same place

as the problems. Self-help is like sticking your broken hand in the blender, thinking that'll fix it.

Our souls are greatly troubled. They are greatly troubled especially when we don't feel they are. Sin is deceptive. The devil comes as an angel of light. The way to destruction is wide and easygoing. All of this spells trouble for the one who doesn't work at deciphering the riddle of himself.

Our souls need a good looking at. Most people don't and won't do this. In fact, all day our souls are whispering to us that they need some tending, but we're listening to the noise of social media or satellite television or pop religion, making sure the squeaky wheel gets drowned out.

What we need to do is roll up our sleeves, lift up the hood, and take a look at our inner selves. We need to get the instructions out, get our hands on some tools. The soul is a tricky thing, and needy. We have to feed it well, keep it well-nourished and well-lubricated. We have to speak to it rightly, like the psalmist—"Hey, soul, what's going on with you? Why are you messed up today?"²

We see the tendency to self-worship, the tendency to stray from God's will and to rebel against his good orders, and like an enlightened mechanic we say, "There's your problem, right there."

The diagnosis is helpful. If we don't diagnose the problem correctly, we cannot address it effectively. We see that our soul is prone to slipping out of gear, dropping quite easily and quickly from Romans 8 to Romans 7. So here we go again, bringing Romans 8 to bear on ourselves.

Some of us like to call this work "preaching the gospel to ourselves."

Look at what that songwriter is doing in Psalm 42. He's preaching to himself. But it's not advice that he's preaching.

He knows throwing good advice into the darkness of the soul is like throwing popcorn into outer space.

No, he doesn't need good advice; he needs good news. Wouldn't you rather have the antidote for sin than an eight-step treatment plan to simply medicate against it? The psalmist sings:

By day the LORD commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life. (42:8)

In the end, as in the beginning, it is not our good intentions or even our good deeds that will get us out of the muck of ourselves. It is God's rescuing hand. It is his enduring announcement over us messed-up creatures, "I love you," that changes everything.

Now, some Christians don't think this way. It seems too easy. But if it really were easy, more people would do it. No, it's very difficult because it means, essentially, admitting *we don't have what it takes*.

I take a look at my messed-up soul every day. I feel completely overwhelmed and underequipped. And so I hold on to the gospel. I pour some gospel into my soul. I am good to go another day. I might be crawling through that day or I might be balled up in my bed, unwilling to charge the Valley of Elah that is my life, but the smile of God is over me continually. Day and night his steadfast love sustains me.

By God's grace, then, disciples of Jesus look for the places we have yet to surrender to him, the places where we've given up ground, the tender spots we want to hide, the stubborn spaces we want to protect, and we ask him humbly to help us. He will never say no to that. Bit by bit, day by day, turning

and returning, we reorient the engine of our life around Jesus. The problem is the same every day but the mercies are new, and the disciples of Jesus will plunder them with abandon. He *wants* us to!

You've got to maintain your soul this way or you will not maintain it at all. You've got to hook your soul on this anchor called Christ or you will lose it, I assure you.

The soul is a complicated thing. The soul is a wormhole, multidimensional, polyhedral. We have outer space inside of us. And we think we can *manage* this? Give this thing a religious pep talk here and there?

No, we can only hope to maintain these souls somehow, tend to them, send out into ourselves the radio signal of the deep magic of the gospel. It's a great comfort to know that the announcement of the finished work of Christ is specifically designed for this inner-spatial mission.

I don't know how my high-school friend Steve is doing these days. I wish I did. I've tried to look him up on Facebook, and he's either not there or he's changed so much I don't recognize him. But if I could get one more chance, I'd love to take a little walk with him down Juan Tabo Boulevard. After a few decades of living, I imagine we'd both agree that life is kind of a mix of *The Running Man* and getting baggies of warm water thrown at your back. But I wouldn't struggle so much to tell him about the hope I've found. Because I've actually found hope in that little message I used to feel nervous about. Now it's *me* I feel nervous about. The only thing I feel confident in is that message!

My soul is not much to look at but it is safeguarded by the One who paid himself for me. This is really the only hope we've got. Sin is our problem. Jesus is the answer. There's

no two ways about it. And if you're not too good for him, you can have him. It helps especially if you're bad.

Look, my gospel is a little sweaty and ragged around the edges. But it will still be in my pocket, worn from good use and serious study—print smudged from the grip of desperate belief—when Christ comes gently crashing back into earth to ask me about it. When the proverbial roll is called up yonder, I'll be there, if this gospel has anything to say about it.