



**WHY
DO I DO
WHAT
I DON'T
WANT
TO DO?**

**REPLACE
DEADLY VICES**

with

**LIFE-GIVING
VIRTUES**

**JONATHAN "JP" POKLUDA
WITH JON GREEN**

**WHY
DO I DO
WHAT
I DON'T
WANT
TO DO?**

REPLACE DEADLY VICES
with **LIFE-GIVING VIRTUES**

JONATHAN "JP" POKLUDA
WITH JON GREEN



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Jonathan "JP" Pokluda with Jon Green, *Why Do I Do What I Don't Want to Do?*
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2023. Used by permission.

© 2023 by Jonathan Pokluda

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pokluda, Jonathan, 1980– author.

Title: Why do I do what I don't want to do? : replace deadly vices with life-giving virtues / Jonathan "JP" Pokluda with Jon Green.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022031064 | ISBN 9780801094965 (paperback) | ISBN 9781540903068 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493439485 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Habit breaking—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Virtues. | Vices.

Classification: LCC BV4598.7 .P65 2023 | DDC 152.3/3—dc23/eng/20220829

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022031064>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

The author is represented by the literary agency of The Gates Group Literary Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my dad.

Thank you for the grace you showed me
and the wisdom you taught me. I miss you.

To my mom.

The world may never know how special you are,
but I know. Thank you for showing me The Way.

CONTENTS

Introduction 15

Part 1 The Ancient Battles 21

1. Pride & Humility 27
2. Anger & Forgiveness 47
3. Greed & Generosity 65
4. Apathy & Diligence 83
5. Lust & Self-Control 99

Part 2 The Modern Wars 117

6. Perception Management & Authenticity 123
7. Entitlement & Gratitude 141
8. Busyness & Rest 157
9. Drunkenness & Sobriety 177
10. Cynicism & Optimism 189

Conclusion 205

Acknowledgments 211

Notes 215

About the Authors 217

INTRODUCTION

We cannot stop a bad habit. We can only replace it with a good one. I become more and more convinced of that reality. We are creatures of habit, and so much of life is making sure we're building healthy ones. To be completely honest with you (which I intend to be for the entirety of this work), I really wrestled with what to title this book. There were no less than fifty different titles we tried out along the way. The last thing I wanted was for it to sound like another self-help book. Your local bookstore (and even the Christian section of that bookstore) is already full of those. You see, I am not trying to help people be smarter sinners.

It is one of my core beliefs that everyone lives forever somewhere—either in heaven or in hell. My goal is to help other Christians, other believers in Jesus, live the righteous lives Jesus desires for us. The only way that will happen is by living fully dependent on the Holy Spirit *and* by doing the things Jesus calls us to do in this life as we pursue holiness. In fact, 1 Peter 1:15 instructs us to be holy in *all* that we do.

But how do we do that? I don't know about you, but that seems like an impossibly high bar to me.

If you have ever parented a toddler (or spent any time around one, for that matter), it does not take long to figure out that toddlers lack something called "impulse control." Their brains aren't fully developed enough to process all of the pros and cons of the decisions they make, so instead they just do whatever feels good or fun in the moment.

One day, when my son Weston was three years old, we were sitting at our dining room table enjoying a meal as a family. In front of him, sitting on his placemat, was a blue cup full of milk. I watched him from across the table as he picked it up and appeared to examine it closely. On the cup was a superhero, so it wasn't too out of the ordinary for him to be looking at his cup so intently at his age. But then he did do something rather strange: he rotated his wrist until the cup was upside down and the milk poured out all over the table.

I jumped up from my seat and said, "Weston, what are you doing?" He remained speechless as the milk poured into his lap like a waterfall from the table. "Why did you do that?" I asked again. He responded with the three most profound words that could come out of a three-year-old's mouth: "I don't know."

"Weston, why did you do that?" I persisted, just hoping I would get some kind of answer that would shine a light on his thought process. And again, he said, "I don't know."

The truth is, while impulse control eventually kicks in, we never quite grow out of that phase of doing the things we know we shouldn't. As I look back on that silly moment at the table and examine my own life through my young adult years into my middle-aged years, I resonate with Weston.

There are many things I've done that I didn't really want to do, but I still did them. Not in a resilient, "do hard things" kind of way but in a rebellious, "I know this isn't good for me, but I'm going to do it anyway" kind of way. And, like Weston, I'm not sure why.

In his letter to the church at Rome (his theological masterpiece), the apostle Paul sums up this internal conflict we all feel at times as believers in Jesus:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. (Rom. 7:15–19)

We are the same way! We want to pursue what is pure, true, righteous, and holy, but for some reason . . . we don't. We do things that pull us away from Jesus. We run toward momentary pleasure or temporal satisfaction. We don't quite know why we do the things we don't want to do.

There are countless times I have looked at something with a lustful intent, even though everything in me knows I shouldn't. I have responded in anger to people instead of showing them the same grace I have been shown. I have felt entitled to purchases I want because I think they will fill some void I feel, even though it never quite scratches the itch. Why do I do this? Why do I do what I don't want to do? And what should I do instead?

Vices & Virtues

If I have learned anything from both my own life and the thousands of individual case studies I have seen up close as a pastor over the past two decades, there are two lessons that stick out the most. One, sin (most often) subtly creeps into our lives. Two, while we love quick fixes, pursuing holiness is a lifelong pursuit full of micro-decisions along the way.

Throughout the pages of this book, we will look at ten different sins (or vices) that seem to trip us up, year after year, generation after generation. With each one of these sins, we will find it can creep into our lives gradually. No one aspires to be consumed by greed or lust, for example. Your heart just often drifts there over time. If you are not careful and on guard, any one of these ten could be the thing that takes you out. At first glance, you may not even feel like it is something you struggle with, but as you press into each chapter and examine your own heart, you may find ways you have been cohabitating with that vice for years without even realizing it.

Along with each sin, there is a corresponding solution (or virtue) to the problem. For example, the solution to the sin of pride is to practice humility. The solution to the sin of anger is to practice forgiveness. We will examine the pages of Scripture to see how to respond in the most God-honoring way we can to each one of these sins that could trip us up.

In his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson says this:

There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.¹

His point is simple. We love to experience or feel things, but the day-to-day grind of fleeing sin and pursuing holiness is much more difficult. But just because it is difficult does not mean that it isn't right. This daily commitment to pursuing the things of Jesus is what it means to be a disciple—a follower of Christ. And here is the best part: you can do this.

Change Is Possible

Almost two thousand years ago, the apostle Paul told the church in Rome, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, *but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2, emphasis added). At first glance, that sounds great in theory, but is it even possible to renew your mind? To put it simply: yes.

Over the past few decades, scientists have learned that you can, in fact, change (or *renew*) your mind. For centuries, the commonly held assumption among scientists and psychiatrists was that beyond the formative years of childhood and adolescence, the brain was done developing and no longer changeable.

But what they have discovered more recently is something called *neuroplasticity* (*neuro* meaning “of the brain” and *plasticity* meaning that it can change because it is malleable and moldable). This is the idea that if you take your thoughts captive—or if you stop a particular activity and replace it with another activity or thought pattern—that pathway in the brain atrophies and a new pathway is learned.

You create new neurological pathways when you replace these old, bad, destructive, or unhealthy habits and thinking

patterns with newer, true, constructive, and healthier ones. How about that? Thousands of years ago, Paul knew what he was talking about! Renewing your mind might be difficult, but it has a promise attached to it: if you do it, you will know God's will.

My prayer for this book is that, as you read about the vices and virtues described in the pages ahead, the Holy Spirit will show where you have given the enemy (Satan) a foothold into your life and that, by looking to God's Word, you will renew your mind as you pursue the life Jesus has called you to. Remember: the only way to conquer a bad habit is to replace it with a better one.

PART 1

THE ANCIENT BATTLES

I loved going to the beach when I was young. One of the perks of growing up in South Texas was that the beach was only a short road trip away, so our family made the trip often. Port Aransas was our go-to family spot. I know, I know; the Texas coast isn't Hawaii, but as a kid you don't really think about that.

I remember one specific trip when I was in elementary school. After parking our car, my mom set up an umbrella, a couple chairs, and our towels. She was nervous to let me swim by myself, so she made me promise to stay where she could see me the entire time.

About a half hour later, I looked up and my mom was gone. I didn't see our umbrella or chairs anywhere. I swam to shore and noticed our car wasn't there either. After all that fuss of "stay where I can see you," she went off and left me?! I wasn't sure what to do, so I started to walk down the beach in search of someone who would give me a couple of quarters for the pay phone. It was then I realized that I was in another area of the beach. I had evidently drifted farther and farther away from my mom. As I walked down the beach, opposite the current, I eventually found her in the same spot.

Sometimes it feels like God is far from us. Often that is because our sin has carried us away. It has distracted us from intimacy with him and turned our attention to the things of this world. All believers wish we could get to some place in our walk with Jesus where we're no longer at risk of drifting. We wish we could shift into cruise control. There is, however, no cruise control in Christianity. To stay near to God, we will have to actively swim exhaustively against the current.

An Ever-Changing List

In the fourth century, a monk named Evagrius Ponticus put pen to paper and decided to sort common temptations into eight different categories, referring to them as "the eight evil thoughts." At the time, he wasn't writing to all Christians—he was just trying to help out some of his fellow monks by explaining how these eight thought patterns could distract them from their ultimate purpose (devotion to Jesus).¹ A couple hundred years later, Pope Gregory I modified the list, shrinking it from eight to seven (saying that pride was the over-

arching vice). Several centuries after that, Thomas Aquinas took the list and modified it again.

What we are doing in this book is simply taking an idea that has been passed down for almost 1,700 years and tweaking the list again, taking some items from the original list that continue to plague Christians and adding a few modern-day struggles that need to be talked about today. This book is split up into two parts: the ancient battles and the modern wars.

While the world is constantly changing and culture is constantly shifting, these are the five classic sins (or vices) and their corresponding virtues that we will address in Part 1:

- Pride & Humility
- Anger & Forgiveness
- Greed & Generosity
- Apathy & Diligence
- Lust & Self-Control

These sins never appear grouped together in Scripture. Jesus did not rattle off this list in order of significance when he was preaching the Sermon on the Mount. The idea is simple, though: falling prey to these sins, however significant or insignificant they may seem on the surface, will eat away at your soul. Unfortunately, you can take my word for it; I am an expert in sin. I didn't come to faith in Jesus until I was in my twenties, and I had plenty of time to experience each one of these five sins in full. Take it from me: every topic we address in this book will rob you of the life you are capable of living.

Depending on your knowledge of the early church fathers or your church upbringing, you may notice a couple sins from the original “seven deadly sins” list are missing. Gluttony and envy weren’t left out because I think they are great ideas (they are not) or because I think they do not matter. Both of those are extremely harmful as well. Gluttony, or overindulgence, ultimately comes down to us *really* wanting something (and using it to numb whatever pain we might be feeling). In this day and age, we do that in a lot of different ways, from how we spend our money to overeating to watching porn to drinking too much. Whatever we have crafted an idol out of, our tendency is to overindulge in it. Honestly, I felt that gluttony is an issue that is spread across multiple chapters of the book, so to give it an entire chapter on its own seemed redundant.

Envy, another sin on the “original” lists, felt similar (particularly as we talk about greed and entitlement later on). Envy comes out of our discontentment—when we feel like we deserve something that someone else has—and we either feed our desires or allow our hearts to drift to a state of bitterness in which nothing we have is good enough. As we will discuss later, this all comes down to the state of our hearts, not the amount of money in our checking accounts or our relationship status.

Learning How to Live

The origin story for this book comes back to a passage from the apostle Paul’s last letter to Timothy, his apprentice and closest partner in ministry, before Paul is to be executed. He is telling Timothy all the final things he wants him to know.

Toward the end of the letter, he gives Timothy some wisdom for how to live.

But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God—having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people. (2 Tim. 3:1–5)

I don't know about you, but as I read that passage Timothy's circumstances do not feel all that different from the fallen world we live in today. But, also like Timothy, we are called to something higher.

CHAPTER 1

PRIDE & HUMILITY

I remember the exact moment when I was called into vocational ministry. I was sitting at my desk in the middle of a Dallas high-rise when I heard God say, “You are going to work for me.” I don’t know if you would have heard it if you were sitting beside me, but I know I did. Now, here is something you should know about me: if you ask the people who know me best, they will tell you that I am not a big “I heard God say” guy. This time, however, was different. Even today, all these years later, I can only describe the experience as startling.

I called my friend Bo and asked if he could meet me at my house right away. Keep in mind this was during the middle of the workday.

“I’m at work,” he responded.

“Is there any way you can leave? Something big just happened, and I need to process it with you.” Being the good friend that he was (and is), Bo said he would find a way to make it happen.

We met at my house at 1:30 in the afternoon. As I paced nervously around the living room, I told him, “You are going to want to sit down for this.” He was confused (and probably equally nervous), not sure what I was about to tell him. “I think God just called me into ministry,” I said.

Bo wasn’t surprised at all. He responded with some encouraging words, letting me know that he had seen God move in my life and could affirm God was doing a new work in me.

Just a few years prior to this moment, I was a regular in the Dallas club scene. I was everything wrong with Dallas wrapped in one person. I was pretentious. I was materialistic. I loved to party. I routinely sought affirmation in shallow relationships and one-night stands. Jesus had saved me and changed my heart, and now it seemed he wanted to change my profession. I hastily decided to hire an attorney so I could start a nonprofit. I thought I would raise money and give it away for Jesus. Bo stopped me and wisely encouraged me to pray before doing anything. “If God is calling you to something, he will show you what in his timing,” he said.

So I prayed. I prayed every day. I prayed multiple times a day. “God, put me where you want me and help me find contentment there.” On the fifth day of praying that prayer, I was walking through the office foyer in Dallas when my phone rang. It was Rick, a pastor from my church. Rick said, “I have a job I want you to consider.” I thought he was talking about volunteering somewhere within the church.

“Sure,” I said. “Tell me where to be and when.”

Rick replied, “No, I mean a *job*. Here at the church.”

I sat quietly on the other end of the phone. Then it hit me. “Oh! I get it. You talked to Bo.”

Rick, now confused himself, responded, “Who is Bo?”

I said, “Did you know that five days ago I told my friend Bo I thought God was calling me to ministry?” Rick had no idea. As it turns out, Rick was simply praying over a job description, and he said God had brought me to mind.

At the time, almost twenty years ago, my wife and I were dinks (dual income, no kids). She was an elementary PE teacher, and I was in business development for a Fortune 15 company. We were bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars annually and (sadly) managing to spend it all on whatever we wanted to have and experience. Also, she planned to stay at home when we started our family. This “calling into ministry” was really inconvenient for our plans. We would be transitioning to a single income—a pastor’s salary of \$40,000. We had a mortgage and would soon have our first child on the way. But you know what? I had no question there was a God. I didn’t wonder if I believed in him. He was more real than he had ever been. If he were asking me to do something, why would I not do that?

He called me to something, and he made a way.

I went to work at that church as a small group pastor. Two years in, I started preaching. Over the next few years, a 150-person ministry grew into thousands of participants, with tens of thousands streaming online. Speaking engagement requests came in by the dozens. A publisher called and wanted me to write a book. I had an agent! Who knew pastors had agents?! I was being asked to speak on some of the largest stages in the world and was making close to as much money as I had in the corporate world, which I didn’t even know was possible.

One Friday morning I was meeting with the other men in my small group. It was common for us to confess sin to

each other and offer prayer for one another. I told them, “I feel as though I’m becoming spiritually arrogant.” When I didn’t make much money and was the guy setting out chairs, God was so real and my motive was so pure. Now I wasn’t so sure. I loved being loved. I loved having fans and followers. Sin had crept in and was starting to wreak havoc throughout my life. I told those guys, “I think I need to wrestle God like Jacob in Genesis 32. He needs to knock my hip out of the socket.” So they prayed he would. You will read more about that later, but spoiler: he did.

Too Many Chairs

Have you ever had to put up chairs? I have moved a lot of chairs in the last twenty years. It is an unexpected part of ministry no one warns you about. When God called me to it, I wish he had said, *JP, I want you to quit your job and go work in ministry. PS: make sure you work on your biceps and triceps.* Just a little heads-up would have been nice.

Metal folding chairs, conference center chairs, hotel ball-room chairs . . . I’ve moved all of them over the years. Whenever it’s time to clean up after an event, the same situation unfolds. Different people carry different amounts of chairs. You always have the one guy who is there solely for the social aspect. He carries one at a time and is more focused on finishing his story than he is on getting the chairs on the rack. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the Gym Guy. You all know Gym Guy. He is there to show everyone that he has never missed arm day. He may even do Cross-Fit. You will have to ask him. Gym Guy is going to try to set a Guinness World Record in that moment. Everyone

else is just doing their best and trying to carry as many as they can.

Without fail, something happens every single time: somebody drops some chairs. It makes a terrible noise. There is nothing worse than the sound of five metal folding chairs crashing onto a concrete floor. Why did they drop them? They were trying to carry too many. Eventually they lost their grip, one chair started to slide out of their hand, and then the whole stack tumbled to the ground. They thought they had the situation under control, but eventually the whole thing came crashing down on them. They were carrying more than they were meant to carry.

The Vice of Pride

Pride causes us to carry more than we are supposed to, and a crash is coming. Christians believe that pride is at the root of Satan's sin. According to Satan's origin story in Ezekiel 28:12–19, he was an angel—the most decorated and beautiful in God's kingdom. But that wasn't enough for him. He tried to grasp the same authority and power God had, so he was cast out of heaven and sent to earth. At the end of the day, Satan decided that merely being in a relationship with God was not enough. He wanted to *be* God. He did not trust God, and then he made it his mission to cause others to do the same. In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis wrote,

According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison: it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind.¹

The same desire that caused Satan to be cast out of heaven shows up in the garden of Eden in Genesis 3. What Satan offers Eve is not a briefcase full of money or unlimited pleasure; it is the opportunity to be just like God. Satan, from the very beginning of humanity, has used pride to tempt people to want to be like God. It is a consistent story arc throughout the Old Testament: God instructs his people to do something, they decide they know better, they do whatever they want, and then they have to deal with the repercussions of their sin. They loved the idea of playing God. And we do too.

This same theme plays out in the New Testament. In 1 Peter 5:5, Peter writes,

In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because,

“God opposes the proud,
but shows favor to the humble.”

Here, Peter is quoting Proverbs 3:34 to drive a message home to his audience: God doesn't just turn a blind eye to the prideful. He *opposes* them. A few years ago, I wrote this verse on my bathroom mirror and read it every morning to remind me of what is true (more on that later). The clothing metaphor Peter uses here is really easy for us to understand too: we are either wearing pride or we are wearing humility.

When we wear pride, we open ourselves up to sin. Our temptation is to read that sentence, nod our heads, and keep going about our days. But stop and think about that: when we wear pride, we open ourselves to sin. Wearing pride leads to us being *devoured* by sin. Do you remember when Lady

Gaga wore a dress made out of meat to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards? If you are unfamiliar, it was not a dress that *looked like* meat. She was basically wearing a rib eye. Now imagine placing Lady Gaga in her meat dress in a cage with a lion. How is that going to go? That is what happens when we wear pride.

We have an enemy, Satan, who is not of this world and wants nothing more than for our sin to devour us and destroy our lives. Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Pride is always the predecessor to destruction.

Satan is like a hungry lion. That’s interesting to me, because then we have options. So what can we do? We can refuse to feed him. Think of Satan like a stray cat (or stray lion, for the sake of this illustration). What happens when you feed a stray cat? It finds a home. You become a cat owner!

But if you starve him and say, “No, no, no. There’s nothing to eat here. I’m not doing that. I’m not looking at that. I’m not going there. I’m not thinking about that,” everything shifts. Satan says, “All right. I guess I’ll find someone else to feed me. I’ve got to eat.” When he doesn’t eat he becomes weak, and when he’s weak you can resist him. So don’t feed him. You have a choice to feed him or not.

How do you know if you are wearing pride? The easiest way is a self-diagnostic test. Ask yourself a lot of questions. Are you anxious? Are you critical of others? Are you defensive when someone points out the sin in your life? Are you quick to notice pride in others? Do you constantly seek out the approval of others? Are you critical of others? Are you insecure? Do you take advantage of God’s grace? Do you feel ashamed? Do you think your sin is bigger than God’s grace

can handle? Do you believe you are worthless or unforgivable? Does a particular sin define you more than God's claim on your life?

If your answer to any of those questions is yes, then welcome to the club. It is one thing to understand that we struggle with this sin, but it is another to seek healing and restoration from it. I believe this struggle, more than any other sin, can rob you of God's favor, his blessing, his joy, and his grace. I have learned this from experience.

The Lesson I Keep Learning

I distinctly remember the day my parents moved me into my college apartment. We hauled my furniture in. We bought a few groceries. We put out a couple of family pictures. I hugged them goodbye, and as I watched them drive out of the parking lot, the realization hit me: I was free to do *whatever* I wanted. There was a world of endless possibilities at my fingertips. Whatever I wanted to indulge in I could, because I was *free*.

The problem was I had all of the freedom I could ever hope for but no maturity. The very next night I went to a frat party and learned what a "keg stand" was. I chased the party scene. I drank. I did drugs. I hooked up with girls. I began feeding an addiction to pornography. I got a job, which paid me money that I could turn around and use on all of my newfound hobbies. I found myself in a relationship with a girl I thought I loved (based on a very unhealthy definition of the word). As I added all of these new things to my life, I started to push out the church and God at the same time.

One evening, I realized I was carrying too much. I felt different. Far from God. Overcommitted. I needed the approval of others. I was constantly performing and trying to keep up my newfound persona. When I said my prayers (I had years of Catholic school under my belt, so nightly prayers stayed part of my routine), I felt like God wasn't listening.

I laid in my twin-size bed, staring through the dark at the ceiling, and began to weep uncontrollably. What had happened to me?

Fast-forward almost two decades from being dropped off in that dorm room. Just about everything in my life was changed. I had surrendered my life to Christ. Gone was the pornography addiction. The hookups had long been a thing of the past; I was now married with three kids. I was serving on a church staff leading a large young adult ministry. I had started getting speaking requests outside of our church. I had just signed a book deal! Everything was up and to the right. Or so it seemed. Little did I know I was wearing pride. In such moments, pride is like a weighted vest you might wear when working out. It might make you look bigger and stronger, but in truth it is just weighing you down. It's making everything more difficult than it needs to be.

Pride leads to anxiety, because we start thinking *everything* depends on us. We think we are either Superman or Wonder Woman, and if we do not live up to our end of the bargain (you know, saving the world) then we are going to let ourselves, God, and the whole world down. But God never intended it to be that way. The next two verses in 1 Peter 5 say this: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (vv. 6–7). You think

you have to do it all right now. You need to graduate with a 4.0. You need to be married. You need the corner office, the perfect house in the best neighborhood, the best schools. And wherever you look are people who seem to have it all while you do not, and you just feel further and further behind. But what if you humbled yourself under the mighty hand of God so that in his timing he might lift you up?

In *his* timing he might lift you up. Sometimes, when it feels like the hand of God is holding you back or crushing you, he is actually protecting you so that when he's ready he can say, "OK, experience this."

During the summer of 2017, I thought I had to do it all myself. I thought I was invincible. I had heard about people getting burned out, but I thought I was immune. I would think, *That's too bad for them. I don't even know what they're talking about. I can't even relate to that.* Sounds humble, right? Then I had a family member get sick and began to care for them and help them. That happened in the midst of a busy summer teaching schedule during which I taught twenty-five times in six weeks. In the middle of that came my book deal, so then I had deadlines to meet and obligations to fulfill.

In the midst of *that*, I went down to a church in Austin and taught three messages back to back to back. As I was driving back to Dallas, a large church on the West Coast called and said, "Hey, we'd love for you to come teach here next Sunday." I couldn't believe it. What an honor! I said, "This is amazing. I'd love to do that." All the while, I began to feel pride swell up in me. These were all great opportunities too. Kingdom-advancing opportunities—but good things become bad things if we try to carry too many things.

I really felt like Superman during that season. As I mentioned earlier, I even told my small group about feeling some pride in myself and reading the story of Jacob in Genesis 32. God knocked Jacob's hip out of socket, and from that moment forward he walked with a limp. I asked my small group to pray that God would humble me. Public service announcement: be careful with that prayer. He just might do it.

I flew out to teach at that church in California. The night before I was supposed to teach, when I was lying in my too-small hotel room bed, my heart started pounding. *Bum bum ba-doom! Bum bum ba-doom!* I thought, *Something is wrong with my heart. What's wrong with me? Something is not right with my heart. What's wrong with my heart?* Then I started going down that path, thinking, *I have to sleep. I have to get up in front of a bunch of people tomorrow. I have to sleep. I need sleep. Something is wrong with my heart. I need to sleep. What's going on?* Have you ever been in that cycle? All you can think about is how you need sleep, so it makes you anxious when you cannot sleep, and it becomes a never-ending cycle.

I finally got through that terrible night and pushed through giving my message the next morning. They were in a series there called "Everyday Heroes," and they had a picture of Superman. A guy got up after me and thanked me by saying, "Was that not amazing? That guy reminds me of Superman." I heard that from backstage and I thought, *Superman? I can't even fall asleep like a normal person. I'm definitely not leaping over buildings. What's wrong with me?*

When I flew back to Dallas, something still was not right. Finally, I could not take it anymore, and I went to the emergency room. When I got there, I told the medical staff,

“Something is wrong with my heart.” All the while, these waves of overwhelming anxiety just came crashing over me. I could *feel* them. This was different from worrying; this was heavier than that. My anxiety was overwhelming. They hooked me up for EKGs and a bunch of other tests, and then the doctor said, “Yeah, your heart is not beating right. There are some PVCs (premature ventricular contractions).”

I looked at the doctor and said, “You’ve got to fix it.” Then the doctor asked, “Are you carrying too much? Are you stressed?”

At the time I didn’t know I was, but let me go ahead and put on some humility: that moment, sitting in a hospital room hooked up to machines, was the answer to prayer. Pride for me looked like a savior complex. Sure, my intentions started off pure. I felt like I needed to save everyone. I needed to say yes to every situation. I needed to control every facet of my life. It looked like taking on more than I could handle but not realizing it. Even my loved ones said things like, “You’re doing too much. I don’t know that you need to be everywhere.” But I felt like I did.

Pride looked like finding my identity in silly, worldly things like book deals and big churches, and the Lord humbled me. He said, *You’re going to wear this, JP*. My heart still skips beats at times. It serves as a reminder not to take on too much. Do you know why he did it? Because he loves me. I say it’s better to wear the hand of God than anxiety.

The Virtue of Humility

You’ve likely heard it said that humility is not just thinking less of yourself but thinking of yourself less. That is true,

and it is a great first step in learning to wear humility. But humility is also more than that. Biblical humility is not just thinking of yourself less but also thinking of others more or thinking more of others.

My ditch (the thing that is going to get me in trouble if I am left to my own devices) is that I tend to think I can do anything better than someone else, even someone whom God created to do those things. That is not a fun thing to share, especially in the pages of a book. But it is true. How that plays out in my life and leadership is *control*. I want to speak into everything. I want my hands in everything. In my pride, my flesh, I think I can do things better. And that's not right. It's not godly, and it is the opposite of humility.

Every year I read a book (but just one). Just kidding—I read that same book year in and year out. It's called *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* by Timothy Keller. It's a really short book that I have found to be helpful over and over again in my life. One of the things it talks about is the problem of pride. You can identify it this way: Do you need to make every conversation about yourself? When you are interacting with someone and they say, "Yeah, well, my kid just got their report card . . ." and you say, "Oh, well, let me tell you about *my* kid and *their* report card," or they say, "Yeah, we're thinking about moving . . ." and you immediately interject with, "Oh, we moved once. We got a house, also," you are pivoting each conversation back to yourself, and something is off.

I say that so passionately because I've experienced this firsthand. I noticed at one point, after being in ministry for a while, that so much of my time was just helping people. They would line up and say, "Well, here's my marriage. Here's my kid. Here's my situation. Here are my struggles. Here's my

addiction. Can you help me? Can you help me? Can you help me?” I found so much identity in helping others solve their problems, and I didn’t even realize it.

I moved myself into a socially awkward place; I would go to a Super Bowl or Christmas party, and if someone wasn’t asking me for help, I didn’t know what to talk about. They would say, “Hey, man, did you see that game? How about this?” I’d say, “No. How’s your marriage?” I know; I was a blast at parties. It’s like everything needed to be a pastoral care situation. Realizing that not everyone needed my help all of the time was humiliating—it brought about humility in my life.

Humility seems like a benign virtue. It is highly likely that when you woke up this morning, your first prayer was not, “Lord, please make me more humble. I just want more humility in my life.” However, I had a profound revelation when studying humility: it is vital to our spiritual, emotional, and mental health. I believe that the secret to happiness is actually practicing humility. Without humility, we can be driven to a place where we think about ourselves all the time. Mental illness is often (not always, but often) born out of pride. We can move to a place of misery. But with humility, we’re able to lose our lives and hold this world loosely. Only with humility can we really live the Christian life as it was intended.

We’re able to serve others joyfully, to get outside of our own heads and assess the needs of others and how we can best care for one another. It really shifts everything to believe that happiness is more tied to humility than anything. When we preface things we say with, “Hey, this might sound prideful, but . . .” we don’t realize that what’s about to come out of our mouths is destructive. We must learn to take those

thoughts captive, imprison them, and execute them, lest they carry us somewhere wicked and evil. If we define greatness as anything other than humble service to the humblest man to ever live, we've made the same mistake as the devil.

The Example of Jesus

Christians look to Jesus as the example to follow in everything we say and do. As Hebrews 12:2 says, Jesus is both the pioneer (or maybe your version says “founder” or “author”) and perfecter of our faith. So, as we try to grow in the virtue of humility, our search starts and ends with Jesus. The entire narrative of Jesus's life is one of humility from the very beginning. Think about it: the very notion that God would become human by being born of a humble virgin in a humble stable in a humble, sleepy little town like Bethlehem is enough right there. But that is just the beginning of Jesus exemplifying humility during his time on earth.

Once his earthly ministry began, Jesus consistently found ways to out-serve and out-honor those around him. Even as his disciples started to quibble about who among them was the greatest (an odd thing to argue about when you live beside the Messiah), Jesus responded with his own personal mission statement in Mark 10:45, saying, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Humility, for Jesus, came through service to those around him. The night of the Last Supper, right before Jesus was to be tortured and crucified, he took time to wash the disciples' feet (John 13:1–17). This humble act, even to the disciples, felt so . . . wrong. Peter even objected to it! But Jesus was

making a point. In the upside-down world of the gospel, leadership is service. It is dying to yourself and your preferences. It is swallowing your pride. It is getting your hands dirty to serve those around you. It is a different way of living.

Jesus's humility did not end there. As he, a sinless man, was beaten, tortured, and mocked all the way to the cross, he did it all with humility. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, described Jesus like this:

And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (2:8)

Jesus made himself *nothing*. Even on the cross—the worst, most gruesome way the Roman Empire would execute someone. Your hands and feet would be pierced. You would have to push up on the nail driven through your feet so you could breathe. You would die this slow, humiliating death by asphyxiation. It was only for the most heinous of criminals who committed the most heinous crimes.

Jesus, who was fully God, pushed aside his unlimited power. The most powerful King did not use what was available to him to free himself but rather used it to serve others. This King died for his kingdom—but the kingdom he died for killed him.

Dressing for the Day

Remember the call from 1 Peter 5:5 to clothe yourself with humility? Here is the thing about humility: it looks good on

everyone. Humility is always appropriate. You can wear it with a tux or your favorite little black dress. You can wear it with jeans and boots or shorts and flip-flops. Whatever situation you walk into, wearing humility will always de-escalate it from the start. It is what Jesus would do.

I remember a couple of years ago I had a meeting on my calendar with someone I found myself rather frustrated with. I don't know if you've ever done this, but I rehearsed the entire conversation in my head. I was perfecting all of my comebacks to each of his arguments, and I found myself getting worked up. Right before the meeting, I walked into my closet to get dressed. In such moments I always try to think, *What will help me further the gospel? What won't be a hindrance? What should I wear?*

In that moment I felt the conviction of the Holy Spirit: *Clothe yourself in humility. You're going to have to put on a lot of humility for this one. You need to put aside your agenda. You need to go with a heart to listen. You need to seek to understand.*

In every conflict I've been a part of, when I am able to do that, things turn out to not be as I first saw them. The motive was not as it seemed. And sure enough, after that meeting, he and I were able to pursue unity, march forward in oneness, and advance the kingdom together. I'm confident that, had the Holy Spirit not been so kind as to remind me of that verse, I would have hindered that outcome.

When Jesus's disciples argued among themselves about who was the greatest among them, Jesus's answer wasn't what they hoped for. He did not wink at one of them or stop the entire conversation to rank them in order. He had already told them in Luke 7:28 that "among those born of

women there is no one greater than John [the Baptist].” You know, the guy who wore clothes made out of camel hair and ate locusts. That guy was the greatest. Why? John used his entire life to point people to the greatness of Jesus. He leveraged everything he had so that people would know about Jesus.

I do not think, when we get to heaven, we are going to be able to say, “God, why didn’t you tell me? I wouldn’t have gotten so lost in my business. I wouldn’t have cared so much about my money. I wouldn’t have been so consumed with my grades. I wouldn’t have gotten so lost in relationships. I wouldn’t have been so wrapped up in getting Instagram followers had you just told me. Why didn’t you just tell me? If you wanted me to be like John the Baptist, why didn’t you just say that he was the greatest human ever born?” He’ll say, “Why didn’t you just read the Bible?”

I think there is still hope for each of us. This could be a turning point, right now. You could close this book and say, “In every relationship, from this moment on until I’m face-to-face with Jesus, I’m going to seek to lose myself in order to serve others and care for those around me.” If you have ever met someone who does that, I’m sure you really enjoy them. So there are benefits for you too—but don’t do it for the benefits; do it to *be like Jesus*.

THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

1. How do you struggle with pride in your life?
2. Do you think of the people around you often, or do you find yourself more consumed by your own thoughts, feelings, wants, and desires?
3. How can you take a step in growing in humility today?