

FOREWORD BY SEAN MCDOWELL

DISCOVER HOW YOUR DEEPEST
QUESTIONS CAN LEAD TO
LIFE-GIVING FAITH

DEMOLISHING DOUBT

CLIFFE AND
STUART KNECHTLE

DEMOLISHING DOUBT

**DISCOVER HOW YOUR DEEPEST
QUESTIONS CAN LEAD TO
LIFE-GIVING FAITH**

**CLIFFE KNECHTLE AND
STUART KNECHTLE**

 **ZONDERVAN
BOOKS**

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

Demolishing Doubt

Copyright © 2026 by Cliffe Knechtle and Stuart Knechtle

Published by Zondervan, 3950 Sparks Drive SE, Suite 101, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA. Zondervan is a registered trademark of The Zondervan Corporation, L.L.C., a wholly owned subsidiary of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Requests for information should be addressed to customercare@harpercollins.com.

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-37083-3 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Knechtle, Cliffe, 1954- author | Knechtle, Stuart, 1988- author

Title: *Demolishing doubt* : discover how your deepest questions can lead to life-giving faith / Cliffe Knechtle and Stuart Knechtle.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Zondervan Books, [2026]

Identifiers: LCCN 2025054699 (print) | LCCN 2025054700 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310370802 hardcover | ISBN 9780310370826 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Jesus Christ—Biblical teaching | God—Biblical teaching | Belief and doubt

Classification: LCC BS544 .K54 2026 (print) | LCC BS544 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025054699>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025054700>

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.® • Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. ESV Text Edition: 2025. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language. Used by permission. All rights reserved. • Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version. Public domain. • Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Reader’s Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1995, 1996, 1998, 2014 by Biblica, Inc. used with permission of Zondervan. www.zondervan.com • Scripture quotations marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. • Scripture quotations marked NRSVUE are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

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—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Without limiting the exclusive rights of any author, contributor or the publisher of this publication, any unauthorized use of this publication to train generative artificial intelligence (AI) technologies is expressly prohibited. HarperCollins also exercise their rights under Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790 and expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception.

HarperCollins Publishers, Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper, Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland (<https://www.harpercollins.com>)

Cover design:

Cover photo:

Interior design: Sara Guild

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

CONTENTS

Foreword by Sean McDowell vii

Introduction 1

Part 1: What Is the Evidence for God?

1. Is God Real? 17

2. Did God Create the Universe? 31

Part 2: Why Should I Trust What the Bible Says?

3. What Is the Bible and Why Does It Matter? 47

4. Can We Trust What the New Testament Says? 63

5. Isn't the Bible Problematic? 83

6. But What About Other Religions? 101

Part 3: What Does the Bible Say About Jesus Christ?

7. Was Jesus an Ethical Genius? 127

8. Did Jesus Really Perform Miracles? 147

9. Was Jesus God and Did He Really Rise from the Dead? 167

Part 4: What Should I Do Next?

10. How Do I Commit My Life to Jesus Christ? 195

Conclusion 221

For Further Reading 229

Acknowledgments 233

Notes 235

FOREWORD

SEAN MCDOWELL

My faith was rocked. Doubts had crept in like never before. What happened? Please allow me to explain. I think you will be challenged and encouraged, and you'll also see why this book is so vital for your own faith journey.

I was a curious college sophomore stumbling around on the internet. I don't recall what I searched for, but I came across an atheist website. While I had previously engaged many non-Christians in conversation, this was the first time I encountered some really smart atheists—doctors, lawyers, scientists, engineers, philosophers. They argued with depth and sophistication that the Bible was fiction, that evolution disproved the existence of God, and that the resurrection was a myth. To put it mildly, *it rocked my faith*.

Not only was I intellectually rocked, but I was emotionally rocked as well. I felt it in my gut. Over the next few days, questions flooded my mind: Was I only a Christian because I was raised this way? Am I really committed to truth, or am I merely following what is convenient? Are there good responses to these arguments?

FOREWORD

While there is far more to the story than I can share here, I do want to highlight one game-changing conversation I had shortly thereafter with my father. At this time, in the mid-1990s, my father was one of the most influential apologists alive. Like Cliffe and Stuart (although before the existence of social media), his evangelistic ministry has reached millions of people worldwide.

Even though I was hesitant, I knew I needed to share my doubts with my dad. We were sitting in a small café in Breckenridge, Colorado, and as best as I can remember, I said something like this: “Dad, I want to know what’s true, but I am not sure I think Christianity is true.” To say I was nervous would be an understatement.

And yet without hesitancy, my dad responded, “Son, I think that’s great. You can’t live on my convictions. You need to search for truth yourself and follow it. If you seek truth, I am confident you will follow Jesus, because Jesus is the truth. Your mom and I will love you no matter what.” I hesitate to overdramatize this experience, but it was a significant moment for me. I look back at it as one defining moment in which I began to yearn to find and follow truth, no matter the cost.

How does this relate to your journey and *Demolishing Doubt*? First, it is *good* to have questions about God. As Cliffe and Stuart say repeatedly in this book, it is natural and normal to have questions about the Bible, the afterlife, and more. Despite what you may have heard, it is *not* a sin to doubt. Honest doubt can often be good. It was for me, and it can be for you too.

Second, God is not threatened by your doubts. God is big enough for your questions. In fact, he invites them! God told the prophet Isaiah, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isaiah 1:18 ESV). Jesus invites us to love God with our hearts, souls, and *minds* (Mark 12:28–34). My dad’s response to me is similar to God’s response to you: Bring your questions!

Third, there are answers if you are willing to seek them. In *Demolishing Doubt*, Cliffe and Stuart offer positive evidence that

God exists and they respond to the toughest questions critics raise about the Bible. They don't pretend to have it all figured out. In fact, they are honest enough to talk about their own doubts. But even amid their own questions, they convincingly show that Christianity is a reasonable faith that truly changes lives today.

Let me end by saying this: *I love this book*. I love that it's full of stories. I love that both Knechtles write from their personal experience as pastors and evangelists. I love that they write as a father-son team who clearly love each other—as well as their readers. I couldn't put *Demolishing Doubt* down. And I suspect your experience will be the same.

Whether believer or skeptic, I hope you will read this book with an open heart and an open mind. Study it. Discuss it with a friend. Share your thoughts online and engage others in conversation. Go for it. The life-giving faith of Jesus is waiting for you.

INTRODUCTION

Thanks for coming today, although I don't think you oughta be here." The red-bearded fellow in the straw sun hat drawled his words as he spoke. "We have an institution of learning here, and your stories—they're beautiful and all, but they don't contribute to the rational discourse promoted at this university. They're exclusionary."

Standing next to the iconic UT Tower in Austin, Texas, I took a quick glimpse at the several dozen students sitting on the West Mall steps shaded by overhanging mesquite trees. Some of them were snickering at his tongue-in-cheek "welcome." A couple others nodded in agreement as they held signs that read "Good Without God," "Secular Student Alliance," and "Free Hugs from Atheists." Still others just gazed intently at the two of us, waiting for my response.

"Is there a religion department here at the University of Texas?" I asked him calmly.

"No," he replied with a grin. The other students began to chuckle aloud, knowing full well there was. "I mean, there *is* a religious *studies* program here."

"All right, so you have a religious *studies* program," I said, mimicking his unclear point of emphasis. "So are you hinting that a pursuit of

the rational does not include discussion about God or religion? What are you talking about?”

“The things you’re saying are uncritical of the ideology you’re promoting.” Still speaking slowly, he waved his hand toward the students on the steps. “It’s not doing any service to the folks here who wanna know if it’s real or not. You just claim what you’re saying is real, and we have to take your word for it. You talk about Jesus dying on the cross and all this proof for God . . . but that’s just a bunch of nice stories. They’re not evidence for anything real.”

Just a bunch of nice stories? Is that all religion is? Could God be nothing more than a figment of our imagination? Is the Bible just an outdated collection of legends no different than some fantasy novel? Did Jesus even exist, much less do all the miracles recorded in the New Testament? And what’s the point of even having such debates? Why can’t everyone just believe whatever they want to believe?

If you’re reading this now, you’ve probably heard at least a few of those questions before. Maybe you’ve always been skeptical about religion and such issues. Perhaps you recently started struggling with these ideas for the first time. Maybe you’re heading off to college next year and wondering how to prepare yourself for the ideological melting pot you’re about to encounter. Or perhaps you’re the loving parent of a teen or young adult who is facing a lot of disbelief and confusion right now.

No matter the reason, we’re really happy you chose to pick up this book and join us on this journey from the valleys of disbelief to the peaks of faith, including all the obstacles we’ll see along the way. We don’t know precisely where you’ve been in your life or what you’ve experienced. And we can’t say for sure that we’ve been there either. But one thing we do know is what *doubt* feels like, the deep-seated uncertainty that eats away at you inch by inch, leaving behind only fear and distrust in its wake. There are few things worse than feeling completely incapable of making heads or tails about what’s true and what isn’t.

Sometimes it's like trying to drive a car blindfolded.

That feels especially relevant in this day and age. You can barely go an hour without running into a chorus of voices on social media offering their various opinions about God, religion, and morality. This virtual echo chamber can make it nearly impossible to stay the course through the depths of one's doubt, much less think straight in general. No wonder some folks just throw in the towel to cynicism and proclaim that none of this is worth the trouble. How are you supposed to untangle what your beliefs are in a world where's there are *so many ideas* out there?

If you're frustrated, disoriented, or just plain unsure where to start when it comes to navigating your beliefs, you're not alone. Lots of folks are in the same boat. And guess what? We've been there too. So let me tell you right off the bat that cynicism isn't the answer. Succumbing to nihilism (the idea that life is meaningless) isn't a viable solution. As tiresome as it may sound right now, wrestling with your doubts is *absolutely* worth it. In fact, there's nothing *more important* in life than figuring out what you believe about God. It's a life-changing quest that can radically transform who you are and how you live the rest of your life. But it's not a quest you have to venture alone, nor an obstacle you need to demolish on your own.

We're traveling this road with you.

Who We Are

For those of you who aren't familiar with us, we're Cliffe and Stuart Knechtle. We're a father-and-son team out of Fairfield County, Connecticut, who, for the past decade, have been visiting university campuses and hosting open-air discussions with students from all walks of life about their religious beliefs.

When I (Cliffe) first started this dialogue-based mission more

than forty years ago—today known as *Give Me an Answer*, a name derived from the title of my 1986 book—I had no idea what to expect. Having recently graduated from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, I knew I wanted to go into ministry and talk with people about God—it’s a passion I’ve had since I was teenager. But at twenty-six I still wasn’t sure what that was supposed to look like. At the time, I was doing evangelism for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in inner-city Boston. But deep down, I felt drawn to college students. I loved their energy, candor, and willingness to discuss deeply personal topics like God, ethics, and human suffering. I’ve always been someone who’s been full of such questions too. So I appreciated the authentic way undergraduates tested the world around them and sought to take personal responsibility for their beliefs. Somehow I knew that was where I was called to be.

The spiritual guidance I needed came in the form of my closest mentor, Leighton Ford. A renowned evangelist, preacher, and author who worked for decades as a ministry partner of Billy Graham, Leighton took me under his wing when I was freshman at Davidson College. When I expressed interest in ministry, Leighton helped me decipher my calling. As an undergrad, I would stay on weekends at the Ford household with Leighton, Jeannie, and their family. He was like a second father to me.

It was Leighton who, in my moment of doubt, perceptively heard God’s voice and advised me to go to college campuses; set up shop outside the student union, library, or quad; and start talking with undergraduates about their beliefs. At first, I didn’t know how to respond to his idea. I kept seeing in my mind one of those ranting, Bible-thumping, apocalyptic preachers—you know, the kind you try to avoid eye contact with when you walk by.

But that’s not what Leighton was suggesting. What if, he wondered, instead of preaching sulfur and brimstone at students, I engaged them in open conversations full of truth, respect, and love?

What if instead of screaming out a fiery sermon, I actually listened to what people had to say and honestly addressed their questions? What if instead of shoving Christianity down people's throats, I empowered them to think more intentionally about their beliefs concerning God?

It was from that advice that *Give Me an Answer* was born.

Ever since then, I've had the joy of sharing thoughtful conversations with tens of thousands of university students from nearly every corner of the United States. Naturally, every single discussion hasn't been sunshine and roses or ended with a friendly handshake. I've had a few water bottles tossed in my general direction. I've received my fair share of ridicule and untimely gestures too. And there have been plenty of debates that got way too heated too fast. (I've learned a *lot* about patience and humility in the past few decades!) But those moments are far overshadowed by the many profound, positive interactions I've had with young men and women who, in the face of doubt, reconnected with their faith. Students who, after losing their sense of direction, came to rediscover new meaning to life. Skeptics and agnostics who walked away challenged to rethink their beliefs and examine for themselves whether there's more out there in this universe than mere matter and energy. And I've learned a lot from all of them along the way too.

In 2015, my son Stuart started joining me on my college campus trips. I can't tell you enough how much of a blast it's been to share this calling with Stuart (and, on occasion, his brother Robert, who still joins us on campus visits). The joy, laughter, and deep relationship-building moments we've had over the last decade have made these years incredibly special for me. I would never have dreamed when I started doing this that I'd someday be following this passion with my son by my side.

When Stuart jumped on board, some of our ministry partners encouraged him to explore using social media as a ministry tool. I'll openly admit that I wasn't too sure about the idea at first. Eventually,

however, Stuart and I warmed up to the idea, and much to his credit, Stuart took the reins and ran with it. After a few years, our online following began growing larger and larger. Soon we noticed our crowds doubling or even tripling in size, with many students approaching us and mentioning our social media content. Before we knew it, we had fan accounts remixing our videos and more interview requests than we could comfortably handle. People even began to recognize us in public. To call the last couple years “surreal” would be an understatement.

At the end of the day, though, we’re not doing this to rack up likes or achieve social media stardom. Don’t get me wrong, we appreciate the support. But that has never been the end goal. What ultimately matters to us is embracing this unbelievable opportunity to engage skeptics in thought-provoking dialogue and encourage believers who struggle with doubt. We want to empower truth seekers as they search for life’s answers and bring the good news of Jesus Christ to this world. That’s what we’re really all about.

What Is This Book About?

Throughout my life and ministry, I’ve spoken one phrase more than any other. It might be as close to a catchphrase as I’ve got. Four simple words that, although not the most comfortable to say, are absolutely central when it comes to growing in truth and faith.

I do not know.

Admitting we don’t know something isn’t a painless thing to do. It’s a real knockout punch to our pride. When someone comes along who challenges what we believe or makes us second-guess something we’re so sure about, our usual impulse is to either get incredibly defensive and confrontational or feel utterly defeated. We tend to either plug up our ears and disregard any and all criticism, no matter how valid it might be, or we surrender to skepticism without a fight. The

problem is that neither of those reactions represents a good response. Neither of them gets us (or our conversation partners) any closer to the truth.

We need to face our doubts. We can't ignore, suppress, or run away from them. Nor can we just wallow in them. We have to learn to work through our doubts and be comfortable with the phrase "I don't know." And that's exactly what this book is about. *Doubt.*

Doubt has gotten a bad rap in our culture. Expressing uncertainty is considered a huge weakness. There's a misconception that if you're an intelligent and successful person, you've got all the answers figured out. We value the veneer of confident self-assurance. We like strong and decisive leaders with clear, bulletproof ideas. Doubt calls all that into question. It's a point of vulnerability, a concession that you don't know something for certain, that you might just be wrong. And last time I checked, nobody likes to be wrong. I know I don't.

However, there's a lot more to doubt than that. For starters, doubt isn't always a bad thing. Doubt compels us to investigate for ourselves whether something is true beyond our presumptions or assumptions. If I wasn't sure whether the milk in the fridge was still good, I'd be crazy to just unscrew the cap, shrug my shoulders, and take an overconfident gulp. Call it blind arrogance. Call it pure foolishness. Either way, it wouldn't be pretty. Any rational person would check the expiration date on the carton, smell its contents, or ask someone when it was purchased. In other words, they'd investigate the source of the doubt. They'd explore whether there was any basis to their skepticism.

Ignoring our doubts can run a far more substantial risk than just drinking sour milk. So many of the important things in life require us to scavenge for truth through well-placed skepticism. You can't make a groundbreaking scientific discovery without conducting loads of experiments to confirm the results. You wouldn't invest your life savings in a company unless you felt convinced it was a safe investment.

INTRODUCTION

In all these cases, honest skepticism isn't a bad thing. It pushes us to look beyond what we currently know, weigh carefully whether the evidence we have is credible, and seek out the most probable answers to our lingering uncertainties. Doubt isn't a bad feeling to just disregard; *it's an opportunity for growth.*

But why, then, does doubt seem like such a dirty word when it comes to faith? There's an onslaught of reasons why some believers feel unsettled by doubt. Some aren't sure how to even express their uncertainties because they've never witnessed someone publicly struggle with such things. Others panic that they'll be ostracized or judged because of their doubts. Still others fear that admitting their doubts will result in their betraying God or sliding into nonbelief. There's a lot of shame, guilt, and social pressure surrounding doubt. No one likes admitting that they're really not sure what they believe.

That's why it's so important to remember that doubt isn't something to be feared or scorned. Doubt is totally *normal*. I have doubts—*plenty* of them. Stuart has doubts too. Jesus's disciples had them as well, even after they saw him resurrected from the dead (Matthew 28:16–17). Truthfully, I don't understand how any person could express deep, authentic belief in God and somehow make it through this life without encountering skepticism at some point. As I've been telling students for decades, I can't say I'm absolutely certain that God exists or that Jesus rose from the dead, because, frankly, I can't say I'm 100 percent certain about *anything* in this world! The idea that we hold all the answers is a naive illusion. There's so, so much we as human beings will never know. There's always room for humility. There's always room for doubt.

But you know what else? It's often those episodes of skepticism that later emerge as the moments when our faith experiences its deepest and most fulfilling growth. Transformation, life, and renewal can be found in our doubts. But only if we seize those moments by the horns. We can't just take them lying down. We can't simply dwell in

our uncertainty or disbelief. *We need to demolish those doubts before they become unhealthy.*

Unhealthy doubt occurs when you find yourself falling into unbelief faster than you can pick yourself up. It's when the rough terrain on the trail leaves you unable to move forward. It's when doubt morphs from an opportune moment for growth to a long-lasting cynical despair that you begin to call home. That's when doubt becomes dangerous and has to be demolished.

In the pages to follow, we're going to embark on a winding journey from disbelief to faith, demolishing doubt along the way. It's an adventure we've taken with thousands of people over the years, and now we'd like you to join us on that same quest. We'll start by examining several arguments suggesting that our universe cannot be reduced to mere matter and energy. Someone or something outside of time and space had to bring this intricately designed world into existence. Based on the evidence, the most probable answer to that question is God.

From there, we'll look at where we can learn more about this creator God—the Bible. Besides exploring what the Bible is and why it's important, we'll address some of the key questions students ask us about the Bible, including those regarding the historical reliability of the New Testament, as well as why we're convinced that faith in Jesus Christ stands apart from all other religions.

Next, we'll shift our focus to the identity of Jesus Christ. After looking at his ethical teachings, sinless life, miracles, and claims to divinity, we'll parse out the full significance of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection and what this means for us. Finally, we'll end the book discussing what committing your life to Christ looks like, as well as the next steps you can take to grow spiritually and establish a personal relationship with him.

A number of years ago, I got one of the most gut-wrenching phone calls I've ever received. There had been a horrible car accident, and my niece had died. A bright, happy seven-year-old girl taken from us in an instant. I can still feel the heaviness of that grief as I think back to that day.

Within hours, I was on a plane to Madison, Wisconsin, to be with my brother and his family. I vividly remember walking with my brother in a field near his house in the raw aftermath. In that field he poured out his heart about his little girl. Why didn't the babysitter driving my niece see the stop sign? Why did she go right through it at the exact same moment a pickup truck was speeding through that intersection?

How could God let something like this happen?

For anyone who thinks they have a clean or easy or simple rational solution to that excruciating question, they're nuts. The only response I could muster, both then and now, is this: *I do not know*. I don't have an answer for that, and I don't think I ever will. But if there's one thing I do believe in my very depths, it's this: The God who created this world, the God who reveals himself in the Bible, the God who became incarnate and dwelt among us, only to get the snout kicked out of him as he suffered on the cross for our sins—this God is present among us. This God is grieving with us, walking alongside us as we try to make sense of our doubts and disbelief.

The journey ahead won't be without its difficulties. The doubts you're facing won't always easily or quickly go away. But I can promise you that there's hope ahead. The God who walked with my brother and me that evening is the same God walking alongside you right now. This suffering God is more than a fairy tale. This God is bigger than your doubts.

What It's Like Being Cliffe and Stuart Knechtle

It's busy!

When I (Cliffe) first began doing open-air college visits forty-five years ago, things were definitely a lot different than they are now. (TikTok was still just the noise your clock made.) Back when I started, we visited more than thirty universities a year, which basically meant living out of a suitcase for weeks on end during the entire academic year. And not just me either. For that first decade my wife, Sharon, and eventually all three of our boys, came along for nearly every trip as well. Every weekend consisted of hours of driving, foraging through paper maps, and eating meals on the road. Each week, Sharon would gracefully turn whatever living accommodations we were given into a cozy, temporary home for our little family. I loved those years, hectic as they were.

These days, Stuart and I typically visit about twelve to fifteen campuses annually. That still keeps us on the road for a solid portion of the academic year. When we add in travel for interview appearances and preaching invitations, plus our pastoral and counseling duties back in Connecticut, it makes for a pretty full calendar. But we absolutely love it. After all these years, it's still such a thrill to connect with students and share the gospel with them.

Of course, some things never change. The wet and chilly days outside still aren't a lot of fun. We also find specific universities that aren't especially accommodating to our visits. While most institutions are pretty welcoming (we've even had some individuals offer to pay all of our expenses for the

week), a few haven't been as friendly, with a couple going as far as to impose limitations on where and even how loudly we could speak.

One thing that has definitely changed over the years is the makeup of our crowds. When I first started, I'd have some days when only a couple of students would stop and chat with me. Sometimes the only person listening to me talk was Sharon! I'd be lying if I said there weren't a few evenings where I went to bed pretty discouraged, wondering if I was really cut out for this. When I did happen to gather a small crowd during those days, the majority of students tended to be agnostics, atheists, or religious skeptics who had no idea who I was. And they didn't hesitate for a second to argue with me. On some occasions, those intense discussions would last hours, with some descending into near shouting matches.

Nowadays, though, by the time we arrive at some college campuses, there's already a group of excited students waiting for us, many of whom have been watching our content for years. Since the pandemic, our crowds have grown significantly. On some visits, it's nearly impossible to fit everyone in the space we're given. Unlike when I first started *Give Me an Answer*, many of the students we talk with now are already Christians. On the one hand, it's wonderful to have deep discussions with believers and help them navigate whatever doubts they're facing. On the other hand, a part of me really misses engaging with non-Christians on a regular basis. They're the people who inspired me to do this in the first place. It's their candid questions that often induced me to grow in my faith and confront my own doubts and skepticisms.

We love what we do. Not a day goes by when we don't feel incredibly grateful for the opportunity we've been given. To be able to share God's love and truth with millions of people, both in person and online, has been an unfathomable blessing. It's been so wonderful to hear from so many people how we've helped them deal not only with doubt and disbelief but also with depression, personal hardships, and divorce. But we know that none of this would be remotely possible without Jesus Christ working in us. Neither Stuart nor I are special by any stretch of the imagination. We're not world-renowned scholars or philosophers. We're not flashy public speakers. There's definitely a lot of content creators out there who are far more skilled at social media than us. We're just two regular guys who love talking about God with college students.

CHAPTER 7

WAS JESUS AN ETHICAL GENIUS?

Who is Jesus Christ?

There's a lot of disagreement and, at times, confusion around that question. Was he an extraordinary miracle worker and healer? An ancient sage or philosopher? A political rabble-rouser? The perfect human being? The incarnate Son of God? Maybe he was nothing more than a mere charlatan or a quack. Could he have been an alien from another planet? (Yes, we've actually heard that one before.) Perhaps he wasn't any of those things. The answers just keep coming.

Without a doubt, the most common answer we get to the question of Jesus's identity is that he was a great ethical teacher. Nearly everyone—even those who have never picked up a Bible or who strictly doubt other truth claims about Jesus—accepts this without flinching. While it's not uncommon to encounter individuals who may express disbelief about Jesus's divinity, miracles, or resurrection, it's quite rare to run into someone who seriously thinks Jesus was a flat-out unethical person.

In this chapter, we're going to dive deeper into Jesus's ethical teachings and extraordinary sinless life in the New Testament. After first explaining why it's so important to see that Jesus was an outstanding moral teacher, we'll look at what the Bible tells us about his moral teachings. Most notably, we'll examine in detail the Sermon on the Mount, which has been called by philosophers, ethicists, and theologians alike one of the most brilliant moral teachings in all of human history.

Why Does It Matter That Jesus Was an Ethical Genius?

As mentioned in chapter 7, there are four reasons we find the truth claims of Jesus Christ to be most convincing over those of other religions. One of those reasons is that Jesus Christ was an unprecedented ethical teacher. However, not everyone sees this as being an important piece of evidence, at least not at first. "Aren't Jesus's claims to be God or his resurrection a bigger deal than his moral teachings?" one student asked me (Cliffe) at the University of Arizona a few years back. "Shouldn't those things overshadow Jesus's role as an ethical teacher?"

To be sure, Jesus's identity as the Son of God and the reality of his death and resurrection (which we'll discuss later in this book) are central aspects of the Christian message. Without those things, there would be no Christianity. But that doesn't mean his moral teachings don't matter. If anything, Jesus's exceptional ethical instructions further highlight his miraculous deeds and make his message even more credible.

It'd be tough to accept the truth claims expressed in the New Testament about Jesus Christ if his teachings were unethical or misled people. If you found out, for instance, that Stuart and I were instructing folks how to embezzle money, cheat on their spouses, and abuse

their children, you wouldn't trust anything we told you. (In fact, if that was the case, we wouldn't blame you if you put this book down right now.) Self-serving or destructive teachings are a clear warning that something doesn't add up.

We've seen this in many cult movements—like Jonestown, Heaven's Gate, or the Children of God—whose charismatic leaders used their teachings to manipulate people for money, sex, and power. Nobody feels they can safely trust someone who misleads them or pushes them toward sin, especially those who claim to have authority. How much more would this apply to someone who claimed to be God incarnate?

The moral teachings of Jesus Christ deeply matter. His *ethical genius* displays wisdom and truth, mercy and self-sacrificial love—the types of virtues that frustrate the greedy, power hungry, and wicked. Such exceptional teachings show that what the New Testament says about Jesus should be taken seriously. His extraordinarily high ethical standards authenticate his equally remarkable claims to be the Son of God. His teachings point back to the all-benevolent and all-powerful creator who designed this world with absolute moral truth and instilled in each of us a conscience to guide us toward that truth (as we saw in chapter 1). In short, Jesus taught the things we'd expect an entirely good, loving, and all-powerful God to teach. His character is consistent.

Conversely, if Jesus Christ wasn't an ethically outstanding teacher, then who would ever be inspired to follow him, especially to their death? That wouldn't add up. If Jesus just passed down a harebrained collection of random sayings, who in their right mind would say, *Wow, this guy must be God?* If Jesus's Sermon on the Mount amounted to little more than "Do whatever feels good to you because it really doesn't matter," or "Seek first yourself and your own well-being," then how could anyone trust Jesus's claims to divinity or the miraculous reports of his resurrection? You can't separate what a person says and

does from who they are. Exceptional people do exceptional things, and if the New Testament truth claims about Jesus are true—that he is the sinless Son of God who performed miracles, was crucified for the forgiveness of our sins, and was raised from the dead to bring us new life and hope—then we should expect his moral teachings to follow suit.

As Jesus himself said, a good tree will bear good fruit (Matthew 7:18). The credibility of the evidence for Jesus's truth claims, as presented in the New Testament, would be greatly diminished if his moral teachings weren't powerful and convincing.

What Do You Mean That Jesus Lived a Sinless Life?

The Greek word translated “sin” in the New Testament is *hamartia*. It derives from a verb that means “to miss the mark,” like an arrow that misses a target. Sin is where our actions don't hit the target, where we miss the spot we've aimed at.

Some people believe sin is simply breaking the commands set out in the Bible. While the Bible does give us ethical guidance and principles to live by, there's more to sin than that. Sin is our human tendency to let our desires and selfishness distract us and lead us to harm others and ourselves. Sin is idolatry. It is taking good gifts God has given us and putting them in a position to be worshiped. As a pastor, I (Stuart) meet with more than a few people who have caused great harm by taking good things and turning them into hyperdesires. A spouse whose addiction to work is breaking their family apart. A high school student whose rejection letter from a university pushes them over the deep end. Men and women who have been caught in a web of dishonesty in the pursuit of money or pleasure. Temptation is a sober reality we all face. No human being is immune to sin.

It's not enough that Jesus was a brilliant ethical thinker. Being able to articulate amazing moral principles or maxims is one thing, but to live them out is a completely different story. That's where the rubber meets the road. All of us, Cliffe and I included, have tried and failed in that department, and we know we're not alone. How many of the greatest ethical thinkers and philosophical minds in history have had a checkered record when it comes to their own actions? Hypocrisy is an easy trap to fall into for every one of us.

One time when we were speaking at MIT, I (Cliffe) asked the large group of students, "Who here has lived a life without sin?" No one moved. That is, until one energetic student shot his hand up in the air. "Me! I've lived a morally perfect life and have never sinned." He barely got the words out before a loud burst of laughter filled the air. Even the avowed atheists in the crowd joined in the hysteries. Why? Because it was clearly a ridiculous thing for the student to say. Even the most brazen moral relativists would shy away from claiming that they've lived a perfect life, that every action and choice they've ever made has been spot-on.

Jesus was an ethical genius not only because his teachings were unprecedented but also because he lived out those teachings to perfection. Jesus was able to live a sinless life because he was more than just merely human; Jesus was also fully God. This truth is stated throughout the New Testament. According to New Testament authors, in Jesus "is no sin" (1 John 3:5). First Peter 2:22 calls believers to follow after Jesus's perfect example, for "he committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." In John 8:46, Jesus said to his enemies, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" You'd think that Jesus's enemies would be the first in line to list off Jesus's missteps and sins. But no one said anything, because there were no sins to list. The historical witness of the New Testament shows that Jesus wasn't full of hot air. He walked the walk and talked the talk.

Now, to say that Jesus lived a sinless life doesn't mean Jesus wasn't

capable of sinning. That'd be a hollow victory. While Jesus was fully God, he was also fully man, which meant that like any of us, he could have sinned at any time. But he didn't. That's the difference. We see this in Matthew 4:1–11, where Jesus, after fasting for forty days and nights in the wilderness, is confronted by Satan, who tries to tempt him with food to meet his physical needs, with a challenge to show his power and glory, and with an appeal to gain worldly power and recognition. Those were real temptations, desires that most of us would have followed. But Jesus didn't. Using words from the Old Testament as his rebuttal, Jesus did what no human being could ever do—resist the unrelenting pressure of sin. He broke the pattern of sin that has defined humanity since the fall in Eden. In the words of Hebrews 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (ESV).

“But couldn't Jesus have sinned when no one was looking?” a University of Arizona student asked during a recent visit there. “The New Testament doesn't tell us *everything* about Jesus's life.” I responded, “Sure, it's totally possible. But does it really seem likely when we look at the evidence?”

Most biblical scholars believe that the four gospels preserve about three years of eyewitness testimony concerning Jesus's life. This is how long Jesus's disciples—his closest eyewitnesses and the sources behind Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—spent with him. As I told the student, three years is about the same amount of time you'll live with your college roommate (assuming you actually like them enough to room with them for that long). By the end of that time, I think you'll have gotten to know your roommate pretty well, better than almost anyone else. Do you think after those three years, you'll be able to say without any hesitation, “Yeah, I never saw them sin once. Never cheated on an exam or lied. Never mistreated anyone. Never acted out of anger or selfishness. They're the perfect person.” Even if you love

your roommate dearly and they're your best friend, there's no way you can say that with a straight face. After all, most of us can't make it for *three hours* without sinning, much less three years.

Neither Stuart nor I could claim anything remotely close to that about *anyone* in our lives, be it our closest friends, our kids, or even our wives. Three years is a pretty substantial sample. If Jesus lived without sinning for those three years under intense public scrutiny, it's pretty safe to say that Jesus lived his entire life in the same sinless manner.

Obviously, living a perfect life is an extraordinary thing in and of itself. No one else but Jesus can truly claim that, be it Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), Mother Teresa, or any Nobel Peace Prize winner. But why is it so important to know that Jesus lived a perfect life? According to the apostle Paul, we have been reconciled with God through Jesus Christ because "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). As we'll discuss in greater detail later, the perfect life of Jesus Christ was necessary in order to restore and redeem our woefully imperfect lives. The words of Jesus in Mark 10:45 make this clear: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The sinlessness of Jesus Christ and the way he lived out all of his ethical teachings without error or misstep tell us that his truth claims are credible, his promises are reliable, and his message is trustworthy. I hope we will decide to trust the words of a sinless person.

What Did Jesus Teach?

Just be a good person.

Don't sin or you'll go to hell.

Everybody love everybody.

Give away all your money.

If you ask a random person off the street to summarize Jesus's ethical teachings, these are the kind of answers you're likely to get. While most people recognize that Jesus was a morally outstanding man, far fewer can articulate what exactly made his teachings so special. The problem is that so many people haven't read closely what Jesus actually teaches.

When we meet students who are curious about Jesus's ethical teachings, I (Cliffe) always point them to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). The Sermon on the Mount is one of the most powerful ethical messages ever preached. It displays in full color the moral genius of Jesus. But don't take my word for it. Robert Coles, emeritus professor of psychology at Harvard University, once said that all of his teachings on ethics over the years point back to the Sermon on the Mount. President Franklin Roosevelt echoed that sentiment: "I doubt if there is any problem in the world today—social, political, or economic—that would not find happy solution if approached in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount."

So what makes the Sermon on the Mount so powerful? I could easily devote this whole book to analyzing it verse by verse and unpacking its incredible wisdom. I cannot stress it enough: Go read it for yourself. Because our space is limited, I'll focus solely on the first section of the Sermon on the Mount, known as the Beatitudes. The name "beatitudes" derives from the Latin adjective *beatus*, which means "happy" or "fortunate." This section is called the Beatitudes because it contains a series of Jesus's sayings in which he describes certain types of ethical people as "blessed."

Beatitude 1: Being Poor in Spirit

Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit consists of acknowledging my spiritual bankruptcy before God. It means to grasp that there is no way I can earn

heaven. I need to throw myself totally upon Christ. I need God to give me the forgiveness and eternal life I do not deserve. This attitude strikes at the heart of religion. For most religions, a happy afterlife is reserved for good people alone. Enlightenment is saved for the wise and diligent. Liberation from suffering can only be gained through diligence and discipline. Eternal life is something you have to put in the effort to achieve.

The problem is that I *don't* and never could measure up to Jesus's high standard of moral perfection. I can't achieve eternal life because I'm a miserable sinner who needs help. This awareness of my need for help is the definition of what it means to be poor in spirit. In Luke 18:10–14, Jesus tells a parable that illuminates what it means to be poor in spirit:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evil-doers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Pharisee, a religious leader esteemed among the Jewish people, boasted in his accomplishments. He wanted everyone to hear his prayer, to see how pious he was. In contrast, the tax collector, a man hated by the people of Jesus's day, humbly admitted his sinfulness. He sought mercy, knowing full well that he could never truly achieve anything even remotely close to ethical perfection.

That is what it means to be poor in spirit—to admit our bankruptcy before God in the currency that gets us to heaven. The poor in spirit realize that, without God’s intervention, we are on our way to hell, regardless of whatever good deeds we can muster. As we’ll talk about in the next chapter, this is where the cross of Jesus Christ comes into play.

Beatitude 2: Mourning Sin and Brokenness

The next beatitude Jesus gives is this: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). How ironic it is that Jesus teaches that real blessedness is found when we mourn and then receive God’s comfort. We live in a world so fragmented that we sometimes become entirely desensitized. Every single day, we watch or read news reports about famines, wars, acts of social injustice, and crime after heinous crime. Such atrocities are standard fare at this point. We’ve become so calloused to it we forget that things aren’t the way they are supposed to be. We just shrug our shoulders and live with it.

Jesus pushes back against this callousness toward sin. He doesn’t want us to be insulated to the tragedy of sin. *He wants us to mourn sin.* Mourning is a genuine acknowledgment at our very core that our world is full of brokenness. To be incapable of mourning is to be incapable of loving. It means we have become totally insensitive to and complacent about the suffering that infects this world. We need to mourn. We need to be open about the presence of injustice and evil. We must also mourn our own sinful actions. As James 4:7–10 puts it, we should all submit ourselves to God, lament our sinful ways, and humble ourselves before God.

But we must not mourn as those who have no hope. As Jesus teaches, God comforts us by giving us hope for the future. God is still working even in the wreckage and carnage of this world. His kingdom is coming. At the end of human history, God will do away with the old

and make all things new. God gives us hope by offering forgiveness. He comforts us by giving us his presence and by assuring us he is at work in the midst of the mess.

Beatitude 3: Being Meek

In the Roman world, honor, reputation, and brute force were king. Subservience to anyone was viewed as a universal negative. Power was something to be exploited whenever and wherever possible. Meekness was not valued; any ancient Roman would tell you the meek never prosper. So when Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5), he is making an extreme countercultural claim. For Jesus, though, to be *meek* does not mean to be *weak*. It means to radically give yourself to others, serving and loving one another without selfish ambition or pride.

Jesus displayed what it means to be meek. When Jesus became incarnate, he placed his power under the control of God the Father. He took on the nature of a human being. Even more amazing, despite being the Son of God, Jesus still served others, even when it was far beneath him to do so. He didn’t hold his status or power over their heads.

Take John 13, where Jesus kneels and washes his disciples’ feet. In a world where travel involved walking miles of dirt trails, feet were constantly filthy. Foot washing was considered a servant’s job in Jesus’s day, something far beneath any person of significance. No wonder Simon Peter protested Jesus’s request to wash his feet. How could he allow the Son of God to do something so disgusting? But after Jesus had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and went to his place at the supper. He told his disciples this:

“Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them.
 “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet,

you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (John 13:12–17)

Jesus modeled the meekness we must show one another. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. He healed beggars and social outcasts. He spent time with women and lepers. Jesus did not mingle with the wealthy; he did not hobnob with the politically powerful. The Son of God gave his time and love to those whom society considered to be losers and the scum of the earth.

The irony of this beatitude is that those who give up power and pride for the sake of others will inherit the earth. The world is not for those who take it by force; it is for those who give themselves for others. As Jesus says in Matthew 20:16, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Beatitude 4: Hungering and Thirsting for Righteousness

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus declares, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." We try to manage our metaphorical hunger and thirst through many ways. We can fill ourselves with sweet pleasure. We can gorge ourselves on fatty wealth. We can drink ourselves drunk with power and status. Those things may momentarily satisfy us, but they'll never truly fill us. We'll find ourselves always wanting more. Only God's righteousness can truly fill us.

Fulfillment and satisfaction come from living in God's love and doing life his way. Moral integrity and living in right relationship with God are the healthy foods that truly nourish us. This is why the psalmist writes in Psalm 90:14, "Satisfy us in the morning with your

unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.” Jesus points out that real fulfillment and satisfaction, real blessedness, come from putting God at the center of our lives, allowing him to change our motives and ambitions, and then doing life his way. A life built purely on our own feelings and selfish wants is a life out of control. It is no better than consuming endless junk food. Only when we seek out God’s will can we travel the path to true fulfillment and satisfaction.

Beatitude 5: Being Merciful

Abraham Lincoln once said, “I have always found that mercy bears richer fruits than strict justice.” Mercy is a response to injustice or need that lets compassion speak louder than suffering or punishment. That’s what makes mercy so difficult.

In his fifth beatitude, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matthew 5:7). In Luke 10:25–37 (ESV), Jesus depicts this attitude in his parable of the good Samaritan. Perhaps not coincidentally, Jesus tells this parable to a lawyer, who is the type of person who would have cared deeply about the implementation of just punishment and recompense:

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of

these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" [The lawyer] said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise."

During Jesus's day, the Samaritans were an ethnic group hated by the Jews; the conflict between the two groups dated back centuries. By making the Samaritan the hero, Jesus highlights the boundary-breaking power of mercy. The priest and the Levite, two reputable social figures, failed to show compassion to the beaten man. They probably asked themselves, *What will happen to me if I stop to help this fellow? Maybe the people who beat him up will beat me up.* But the Samaritan asked a different question: *What will happen to this fellow if I do not stop to help him?* And so he stopped and showed him mercy.

If there is no God, it makes perfect sense to avoid messy situations that require an attitude of mercy. Showing compassion to others is risky. It can put our time, energy, finances, psychological well-being, and reputations on the line. But if there is a God who gave us the gift of life, who commands us to love one another, and if God loves us so much that he gave his own Son to die on a cross to pay the penalty for our wrongdoing, then it is totally reasonable to dedicate our lives to showing compassion to others. Love is not simply a feeling; it is a decision to action.

Mercy also involves forgiveness. Forgiveness is at the center of what Christianity is all about. To forgive involves absorbing the pain and absolving the debt of another. It is a costly endeavor as powerfully pictured in the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross is a clear statement that God is merciful and gracious. It is the costliest of payments for the costliest of debts—the sins of all humanity. A Christian is someone who has accepted responsibility for their wrongdoing and has turned to Christ for forgiveness. Once we accept this forgiveness, it is mandatory for us to extend this same mercy to those who have wronged us.

Instead of seeking revenge, we are called to forgive. I (Cliffe) will

be the first to say that doing so can feel horrible. Real forgiveness, if we've been hurt badly, is never easy. It's hard to love our enemies. It's hard to show mercy to those who have cut us off at our knees. Luckily, we have Jesus as our model. The one who died a painful death on a cross for our sins did not hesitate to proclaim in his agony, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). If Jesus could lavish such mercy on us, the least we can do is pour out this same mercy on others.

Beatitude 6: Being Pure in Heart

We don't talk much about purity these days. So when we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8), it can be difficult to fully grasp what he's declaring. During the time of Jesus, purity was an important concept. Jews who entered the temple to worship God had to follow a number of ritual laws to ensure that they were prepared to be in God's presence. They had to avoid contact with impure things such as dead bodies. They had to eat a proper diet. They had to wash themselves in a ritual bath known as a *mikvah*. All of these rituals were intended to make their bodies pure before God's holiness. Any impure person who entered God's presence risked provoking God's wrath or being overwhelmed by his holiness.

Purity matters to Jesus too, but it's purity of the *heart* that truly matters, not the body. For Jesus, what makes someone pure depends on the quality of their inner person. We can't fake purity with outward actions. It must come from within. Jesus teaches exactly this in Matthew 23:25–26: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean."

The Pharisees were among the key authoritative figures in Jesus's day when it came to purity law. They were the experts who knew what

people had to do to prepare themselves to go into God's presence. So when Jesus said the Pharisees cleaned only the outside of the cup but not the inside, he was declaring that they cared far more about appearances and performance than true purity from within. A person can look clean on the outside yet still have a dirty heart.

A pure heart seeks to overcome the influences of selfish desire and sin. It strives to forge healthy and genuine relationships with God and with others without becoming distracted by insincerity and deceit. Hypocrisy and deception are unacceptable to the pure in heart. It can be tempting to weave a web of lies to make ourselves look like we have it all together, to post misleading pictures of ourselves on social media, boast about false accomplishments, or hide our failures and sins behind closed doors. But just because the outside of our cup is clean doesn't mean the inside is. This is what makes this beatitude so powerful. A pure body may allow a person to enter God's temple, but only those with a pure heart can truly see God.

Purity of heart is a lifelong project. It is an endeavor that forces us to give up our insecurities and moral shortcomings. And if you're like me, you'll be dragged kicking and screaming into it, because it's not easy to give up our crutches. But it's all worth it because it will allow us to see God in a more intimate way, to know him more personally.

Beatitude 7: Being a Peacemaker

Jesus's statement "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9) is the only place in the New Testament where the Greek word *eirenopoios* ("peacemakers") is used. The notion of peace, known as *shalom* in Hebrew, is a key idea in the Old Testament. Unlike our modern conception of peace, *shalom* goes deeper than simply avoiding conflict and getting along with one another. *Shalom* means wholeness and completeness. A world of *shalom* is one in which strife and animosity do not exist, where God's image bearers value one another as his creation. *Shalom* isn't just a

temporary ceasefire; it is the harmonious way life was created to be. It's the amazing moment when the way we organize and conduct our lives correlates with God's good order.

Why did Jesus die on the cross? To bring the *shalom* that would restore the relationship between humanity and God. To mend what was broken. We, too, have been called by Jesus to bring *shalom* to the world. We live in a time rife with conflict. Every day we witness the world-destroying effects of selfishness, greed, anger, and hatred. From international wars and political combat to communal disunity and families torn apart by arguments and disagreements, our planet longs for wholeness again. The cross offers this wholeness. It enables each of us to become adopted as God's children. Let that sink in. God wants to call us his sons and daughters. But this kind of family cannot be defined by conflict and hatred. In order for us to have genuine peace, we have to be willing to bridge the gaps that divide us.

True peace is about more than grinning and bearing pain. *Shalom* takes more than just ignoring hurt. We must be willing to both apologize to and forgive our fellow humans. We must be willing to do the difficult work of working through our disagreements. We must be willing to see one another as Jesus Christ sees us. In that sense, the peacemakers are more than conflict resolvers; they are those who bring our broken world back in line with the way God first created it.

Beatitudes 8 and 9: Experiencing Persecution

The final two beatitudes, which are interconnected, appear in Matthew 5:10–12. There Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

The building up of God's kingdom will always have detractors. The early church experienced this firsthand. Quite a few of the first apostles who followed Jesus—including Peter, James, Paul, and Thomas—were martyred for their faith in Christ. The Romans viewed many of their emperors as gods. Coins depicting the emperors often claimed as much. Jesus's followers refused to proclaim that Caesar was Lord, insisting that Jesus Christ was Lord, and some paid the ultimate price for that refusal. They rejected the Roman deities worshiped by their surrounding culture and faced social discrimination, mistreatment, imprisonment, and even death as a result. The second-century Christian author Tertullian wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" (*Apologeticum* 50).

Just because Roman persecution of Christians officially ended at the beginning of the fourth century doesn't mean followers of Jesus have had it easy ever since. It is harrowing to know that more people have died globally for their faith in Christ in the twentieth century than in all the preceding nineteen centuries. Although it's unlikely many of us living in the West will be pressed to die for our belief in Christ, it doesn't mean we won't receive some raised eyebrows or be the subject of stereotyping or cultural ridicule. As the apostle Paul said, the cross of Christ is a stumbling block and foolishness for many (1 Corinthians 1:23). It's why taking the initiative to wrestle with your doubts and allowing those uncertainties to propel you to seek growth and understanding is so important. At some point, you will face people who will call into question your trust in Jesus Christ. We can tell you from experience that some of them will be genuinely curious about the evidence that led you to belief. Others will ask because they're struggling with their faith and need encouragement. And unfortunately, a few are out to demolish your faith and prove you wrong.

But notice that Jesus doesn't encourage us to get even. He doesn't proclaim, "When you're insulted, strike them right back. Have that

good-feeling gotcha moment!” In a radical departure from the way the world does things, Jesus says to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:38–42). He calls us to respect those who have done us dirty:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (Matthew 5:43–46 ESV)

I’ll admit this can be incredibly hard for me (Cliffe) to do. I’m prone to hate my enemy; I can be pretty stubborn and proud sometimes. But when I stop and look at our world and watch the amount of animosity that spews from its political, cultural, racial, social, and economic conflicts, it hits me that something needs to change in all of us, me included. It’s tragic to see good people just start outright hating each other because of their differences. That’s not the way things should be. Jesus calls us to break that vicious cycle of violence and find joy in the radical grace and mercy of Christ’s heavenly kingdom. Revenge and indignation are cheap trinkets compared to the rich reward of heaven.

The Beatitudes only scrape the surface of the genius of Jesus’s ethical teaching, both in the Sermon on the Mount and across the entire New Testament as well. During his life, Gandhi also professed profound appreciation of the Sermon on the Mount: “I have regarded Jesus of Nazareth as one amongst the mighty teachers that the world has had. . . . I shall say to the . . . Hindus . . . that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus.” The Beatitudes offer a crystal clear description of what it means to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Jesus Christ had a truly ethical mind the likes of which the world has never seen. But just as astonishing as the content of Jesus's moral principles is how faultlessly he lived out those teachings. Jesus was no hypocrite; he lived a life without sin, the type of life we all wish we could live. Yet remarkably, Jesus does not judge us for our faults and shortcomings. He doesn't hang over our heads the inability to live up to his high moral principles. His gracious promise of eternal life is always freely given, never earned. That's the good news of Jesus Christ.

In a heartfelt moment we shared with our friend George Janko on his show, he captured just how beautiful and utterly unbelievable this promise is. Recalling how his life has changed since starting *The George Janko Show* and becoming serious about his belief in Christ, George admitted feeling like a fraud sometimes, especially when fans thank him for changing their lives. "I'm ashamed of myself," he confided. "I keep trying to push people in the right directions that I'm trying to go toward, but I'm failing at it myself. And yet they're looking at me like I'm killing it."

We've both been there too. Perhaps the apostle Paul said it best: "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" (Romans 7:18–19). But in the eyes of God, we are not our sin. When we don't measure up, the grace of Jesus Christ tilts the scales in our favor. As George put it so well, "You're never going to be perfect. You're always going to fail God. But because of Jesus Christ, you're still going to be good enough to go to heaven." That's good news if we've ever heard it.