

# GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL AND KIND



BECOMING WHOLE IN A  
FRACTURED WORLD

**RICH VILLODAS**

Author of *The Deeply Formed Life*,  
winner of the *Christianity Today* Book Award

GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL AND KIND

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For my children, Karis and Nathan.  
When I think about goodness, beauty,  
and kindness, I see your faces.

I am so tired of waiting,  
Aren't you,  
For the world to become good  
And beautiful and kind?  
Let us take a knife  
And cut the world in two—  
And see what worms are eating  
At the rind.

—Langston Hughes, “Tired”

## FOREWORD

BY ANN VOSKAMP

“There’s a reason he called us his Body and not his Estate.” That’s what Tib Pearson told me—Tib with his Red Wing work boots and worn John Deere hat and hands weathered and etched like a graying cedar rail.

“A Body is connected with sinew and veins, but an Estate is divided with fences and lines.” He said it with his hands, the way a man of the land does, and you could see how his hands knew rusted wire and gnarled barbs and how to free things caught in fences.

“You gotta cut down the fences—or you cut up the Body.”

It was Christ himself who gave us a mandate at the Last Supper:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As  
I have loved you, so you must love one another.



By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

But the way we live that? How often do we take the mandate to love one another and make it some flimsy, take-it-or-leave-it suggestion?

Sometimes you'd think Christ's own were known by who they avoid, who they disdain, who they call out, who they label. You'd think being known by your love is being known as a liberal or conservative instead of a *Christian*, and there are a thousand things backward about this.

There was also Jesus before Calvary, Christ crushed beneath that Cross, Jesus begging that prayer of Maundy Thursday:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message . . . that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20, 22–23)

Think about these words. Only those who love are sent by Christ. Without love, Christ didn't send you.

It is no secret that we find ourselves living in some of the most divided and difficult times in many decades. Sometimes we feel like every headline brings more hard news that breaks our hearts, and where do we turn, how do we turn? Disease. War. Unrest. Uncertainty. In the turmoil of these times, Christ's people have not been immune. In fact, we

have often found ourselves faced, as if in a mirror, with dramatic failures in loving like Jesus, exactly when circumstances around us have most demanded it. We have struggled as a community of faith, and many of us have faced feelings of betrayal or confusion. Discouragement is natural. Despair is tempting. But what are we to do to find a new way forward?

That is the large, quiet question behind the book you are holding in your hands. Rich Villodas is one of the deepest, wisest thinkers in the church today; his heart is shaped like the Cross and he speaks the dialect of Jesus—and sketches a real way forward. Rich speaks countercultural truths in a way that changes more than culture; it turns hearts. Rich is a man who doesn't say what tickling ears want to hear but who does say what actual hearts are desperate to know in times like these, because this is a man who lives with his heart pressed close to Christ's. And it is Christ's heart you will encounter on every page.

As you read these compelling words, keep a pen in hand and then write down your own words, in the margins, in a journal, but read with a pen, because these pages are drawing a pathway to the good, the beautiful, the kind. You will want to trace the way, engage it, listen to the Holy Spirit beckoning and convicting and moving. And you will need to leave your own ink tracks to the good and beautiful and kind that you are seeking. Read with attentiveness because attentiveness is the beginning of receptiveness. And this is a book that you fully want to receive—these words will profoundly reorient.

As you begin the book, ask your own soul, *What would my life be like if I lived this way? Who will keep Jesus's com-*

*mandment, the mandate to love, and who will be the answer to Christ's prayers? Who will love as he loved and live out the good, the beautiful, the kind?*

The body of Christ has a thousand fractures and divisions and circles, but obedience to the law of love is the most expedient way to preach the gospel. Love is the most radically subversive activism of all, the only thing that ever changed anyone.

We never have to be afraid to love. As if love might gag truth? As if it could kill God? Love never negates truth. Love never silences truth. Love is the very *foundation* of truth. Without love, truth crashes, a clanging cymbal. Without love, Christ didn't send you. Love is the language of truth, and grace is the dialect of God, and truth is only understandable if spoken with understanding love.

Christ prayed that mandate on Maundy Thursday, that we might be brought to complete unity. That unity doesn't mean we paper over our differences. It means we open the papers of his Word and dialogue, not open fire and destroy. True, there is always this tension between practicing unity and preaching truth. But it is the tension of two people hanging fiercely on to each other, like the tension of a bridge, that the gospel might go forth into all the world. We cannot let go of each other.

See, Tib Pearson knows what every farmer knows. If you want a field to yield crops, you must sometimes tear down fences.

That's how the enemy tries to cut the Body: If you disagree with someone on one point, then you must disdain or dismiss them entirely. And if you acknowledge or affirm someone, then you must agree with them entirely. This is a lie. *Break it.*



Christ carries his Cross, and this is the call of God in this hour to the body of Christ in this world: Instead of drawing dividing lines in the community of Cross believers, the broken are called to demolish the walls of division.

We could be the people seeking the good, the beautiful, the kind, who are ready to obey the mandate of the Thursday before Good Friday: to find one person different than we are, and we broken people start breaking down walls by reaching out to someone of a different denomination, a different political leaning, a different nationality, a different culture, a different orientation, a different skin color, a different religion.

We could be the people seeking the good, the beautiful, the kind, who take seriously enough the Maundy Thursday commandment to actually *love* one another that we invite someone to our table from the other side of the fence.

And if there's someone we wouldn't want at our table, then we need to see who Jesus wanted to sit beside at the Last Supper table. If Jesus can dip from the same bowl as Judas, we can share the same table, the same space, with anyone, with grace.

We could be the people seeking the good, the beautiful, the kind, who instead of waging attack on the *implicit* issues of another's faith life spend our lives openly encouraging an *explicit* faith in the living Christ.

We could be the people seeking the good, the beautiful, the kind, who know that "the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6). We could be the people who know not just in our cerebral synapses but in the chambers of our bravely pounding hearts that if we have right doctrine but have not love, we are nothing more than a clanging cymbal.

Instead of being part of the clanging cymbal, we get to grab our pens and turn these pages, as the rare and exceptional wisdom of Rich Villodas leads us into more wholeness in a fractured world.

And Rich shows us that the only barbs the body ever knows isn't the fracturing of more hostile, barbed wire fences but the barbed thorns pressed into Christ's brow as he shows each of us how to live the cruciform love of the good and beautiful and kind.

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## INTRODUCTION

Goodness. Beauty. Kindness. Three things we long for; three signs of a life well lived; three realities of God's presence. Yet they remain words hard to live into in our world, as we are prone to seeing (and experiencing) their negation: evil, ugliness, meanness.

We exist in a world eating away at itself. A world fractured from within. A world aching for wholeness. Whether the fractures are related to politics, race, religion, public health, or sexuality—to name a few of the polarizing issues we feel daily—our lives are not often marked by love, goodness, beauty, and kindness but by reactivity, impatience, judgmentalism, violence, and the inability to hold space with one another.

We carry the stress of our fractured world in our bodies and in our relationships. Friendships that once were a bedrock of strength have dissolved into wastelands of disgust. Families who once gathered around tables have converted those tables into walls. Many who used to share life together

now live under a cloud of suspicion toward those same people.

All of this makes me wonder, How did we get here? And, more important, How can we begin to envision something different? These are the two simple questions that are crying out in our streets, homes, and churches and deep in our souls. We long for the good life, a beautiful life, a kind life.

The fractures within and around us don't feel right because our souls desire bonds of belonging and belovedness. We were not made for the kind of antagonism that pervades our world. We were made in love, and for love, by a good, beautiful, and kind God.

Sadly, however, we find ourselves stuck. Most of us believe the only option before us is to fondly recall the memories of the past, lamenting that those days will never return. But what if there was a future? What if it were possible to find ourselves learning to love in such a way that heals? What if the pain we carry didn't have the last word? What if there were a way that made for peace, joy, and love? I believe there is such a way.

To understand and respond to the moment we are in requires us to ask ourselves a few questions: How do we find wholeness? How do we love well? What are the forces behind the fractures? What kind of spiritual formation do we need to embody? In sum, what does it mean to have our lives formed by God's love? These are the questions I've been sitting with for many years—questions we will explore together.

I pastor a large, diverse, and complicated urban congregation, and the fractures of the world have often touched our lives. I have had to be formed—and do my best to form others—in the way of love, in the way of Jesus. The diversity



we treasure—along racial, generational, economic, political, and theological lines—has forced us to consistently reexamine our commitment to the way of Christ’s kingdom. I have repeatedly learned that it’s much easier to preach the kingdom than to live it. As a community, we have had to rediscover the truth that wholeness, healing, and love are found in the ancient path of Jesus.

Jesus offers a way of being human that is powerful enough to tear down the walls of hostility we have grown accustomed to. His gospel gives us a vision of loving well. It’s a soul-healing, enemy-reconciling, truth-telling, justice-embodiment, sin-conquering vision. It’s one we can’t live without, especially since most people have not been formed to love well in our society, including within our churches.

It’s easy to see how love—personally and publicly—feels elusive. But what if that could change? What if we submitted ourselves to an ancient path that forms us out of sentimentality and into self-giving love, out of anger and into compassion, out of fear and into hospitality? This is the essence of this book.

To talk about big words like *wholeness*, *goodness*, *beauty*, *kindness*, and *love* is no small task. The best wordsmiths have stammered trying to succinctly articulate these signs of the divine. My attempt in this book is oriented around not so much defining them as describing them and then offering a pathway toward them.

## CUTTING THE WORLD IN TWO

To arrive at this point, however, requires us to do the hard work of looking within. It’s something like the work the

American poet Langston Hughes exhorted us to do in his timeless poem “Tired”:

I am so tired of waiting,  
Aren't you,  
For the world to become good  
And beautiful and kind?  
Let us take a knife  
And cut the world in two—  
And see what worms are eating  
At the rind.<sup>1</sup>

After naming the longing we all have for a world marked by goodness, beauty, and kindness, Hughes abruptly admonishes us to take a knife and “cut the world in two” to examine the realities beneath the surface. It’s a vivid image. It’s important to note that he is not recommending a dualistic, judgmental way of life where we establish who’s in and who’s out. It is not the language of division but of depth. He is trying to help us look deeper—to examine the rot and the worms eating away at our lives. Hughes knew that it’s only when we start here that we can truly undertake a life of goodness, beauty, and kindness. That’s where I’d like to take you as well. I don’t want to cut the world in two just to fixate on the worms. You can go to social media for that. Rather, I want you to see the worms that often go unnoticed and then offer a vision of what we can become if we allow God to work in and through us.

As we journey together, we will walk through three parts to root us in this way of life. In the first part, we will “cut the world in two,” exploring the ways that love, goodness, beauty, and kindness get *eaten from* our lives and our world.

We'll navigate the themes of sin, powers and principalities, and trauma.

In the second part, we will focus on how the good, beautiful, and kind life gets *formed* in us through contemplative prayer, humility, and the cultivation of calm presence.

The final part will examine the ways all this gets *embodied* through healthy conflict, forgiveness, and justice.

Before we examine these themes, a word about patience is in order. Living a good, beautiful, and kind life—the way of Christ's love—is not something that happens overnight. Love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; that is to say, it grows slowly. There is no shortcut to love. The assumption that many carry is that God can produce something in us quickly, but fruit is grown over time. The gifts of the Spirit are given generously and quickly. Not so with the fruit of the Spirit. One of the dangers is we expect the gifts of the Spirit to quickly do what only the fruit of the Spirit is meant to do slowly.

So give yourself grace. We are all on the journey. If we try to rush through this content, we will have merely read a book, not opened ourselves to the work of God's grace. But this work is too important to skim by. As you read, take notes in the margins. Underline and highlight generously. Journal and find a friend or a group to process your findings with. The best kind of transformation happens in community.

With all that, let's pursue the good and beautiful and kind life together.

*Lord, you desire us to be formed by your love. Give us grace not to live this material perfectly but to wrestle with it faithfully. By the end of the journey, may we have moved closer to you, our neighbor, and ourselves. In Jesus's name, amen.*

PART ONE

# **THE FORCES BEHIND THE FRACTURES**

## CHAPTER 1

# A FAILURE TO LOVE

### Sin, the Fracturing of Reality

**A**t its core, sin is failure to love. It's a power that "curves us inward." In the words of North African bishop Saint Augustine, humanity is *incurvatus in se*, curved in on itself.<sup>1</sup> Humanity suffers from a severe condition. No matter if our physical eyes may be able to gaze upward, our spiritual vision tends to curve horribly in upon itself. And with this stunting self-focus of our attention, we cut out love.

Not many of us associate sin with love. Sin usually conjures images of lawbreaking, trespassing, and debt (all helpful metaphors for understanding our relationship to God). What I would like to propose, however, is that we broaden our scope—or rather, focus our lens. We must understand sin in the light of love as we seek to live in the way of Jesus, especially those of us who long for wholeness.

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he responded with absolute clarity: *Love*. Love is the greatest command. He said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the



second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:37–40).

Jesus’s summary of Holy Scripture leads me to a conclusion that might surprise you: If the greatest commandment given by Jesus is rooted in love, the greatest sin—and perhaps all sin—must in some way be the rejection of this command. This is what makes sin so pernicious. It orients us inward. It curves us in on ourselves, and in so doing, it uproots love, goodness, beauty, and kindness.

To classify sin as failure to love is not to sentimentalize or soften it. It’s to frame the very essence of our lives with God and one another in the way Jesus did. The chief end of humanity is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever,”<sup>2</sup> to paraphrase the old Westminster Catechism. And the means to this end is simple: love. Love is the fulfillment of faith; sin is the negation of it.

Paul the apostle captured this better than anyone besides Jesus himself. In the early years of the church, new communities were being formed, often in ways that somehow sidelined love. Because of a variety of temptations, failures, and distractions, love was not regarded as the most important expression of faith. As one example, among some Christ followers in the city of Corinth (in ancient Greece), love was superseded by charisma. This emphasis resulted in many interpersonal fractures, which led Paul to write a letter to them. As he neared the end of his correspondence, he wrote what has become famously known as the “love chapter.” First Corinthians 13 shows up in almost every wedding ceremony. It’s a beautiful description of what love is: “patient,” “kind,” and all the rest. But it’s important to note that Paul didn’t have wedding bells, bridesmaids, and



bouquets in mind when he wrote the passage. It was not intended to give the reader warm, fuzzy feelings. The chapter was Paul's word of rebuke to Christ followers who had become fractured and distracted. They were marked by great miracles and charisma among them, but they had little of maturity and character where it counted.

To end the chapter, Paul made it plain: "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (verse 13). If love is the greatest good, sin must be the antithesis of it. Sin is not just a violation of a law; it's the disruption of love.

It might be easy to think of this as simply an abstract theological idea. But what if it wasn't? What if you could trace all the horribly concrete wounds and fractures of our culture, churches, families, and most intimate relationships to the disruption of love? What if our world—so far from being good, beautiful, or kind—was in the state it was in precisely because of this failure to love?

## RECOVERING "SIN"

Now, the last thing you might want right now is another preacher pointing out sin. *Here goes Rich, lecturing on morality—in the first chapter, no less!* If that's you, please give me a chance, because I want us to understand together what Langston Hughes called the "worms . . . eating at the rind." And we cannot do so, we cannot name or understand the forces that sabotage our lives and break our society's most sacred bonds if we lack an intimate, accurate understanding of both love and sin.

The historical and modern fractures in our world need a



category vast enough to make sense of our vast present pain. We need sociology and psychology to help us understand our fractures, but it is *theology* that places them in their true and larger context. It might sound strange to say this, but we need sin. We can't talk about ourselves or our society accurately without it.

In her book *Speaking of Sin*, Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor noted that

abandoning the language of sin will not make sin go away. Human beings will continue to experience alienation, deformation, damnation, and death no matter what we call them. Abandoning the language will simply leave us speechless before them, and increase our denial of their presence in our lives.<sup>3</sup>

In a culture where Christianity is no longer the center of human reflection and engagement in the world, any talk of sin can be rough sledding. Sin has come to be associated with judgmentalism, bigotry, and a selective, inconsistent moralism, leading people—religious or otherwise—to conclude that it's just another word used to control and coerce people in a particular way. As a pastor, I must admit that there is much truth in this. Sin as a concept *has* been abused, used to control, and used to shelter and even justify indefensible hypocrisy by spiritual communities in our shared social life.

Recently, I had a conversation with a neighbor in my apartment building. After hearing that I was a pastor, he began to wax eloquent about the oppressive tendencies of religion. For him, *sin* has been a manipulative word to keep

people in line—to control their sexuality, money, and political convictions. It implies a threat. In his opinion, sin is just another way to create a world in the image of the powerful or privileged. As he shared this, I had to agree with much of what he was saying. Just look around! The language of sin has been used as a hammer to crush anyone who doesn't share the same ethical standards, and that's tragic. But there are more redemptive ways of understanding sin. And holding fast the hope that we can learn to love in a way that restores, shouldn't we try to do so?

## REFRAMING SIN

When we define sin relative to love, we do not have to discard outright the traditional ways we have understood sin. In fact, there are clear biblical passages we can point to that speak of sin as breaking God's law. But they do not present a complete picture, and most of us need a course correction. In our culture, sin has usually not been seen as a failure to love but almost exclusively as a violation of a law: God's law.

When we expand our understanding, we can better assess our spiritual health. Perhaps we have not broken God's law today, in a strictly defined legal sense. But have we failed to love? Have we curved in on ourselves, missing opportunities to share the love of Christ with the poor or vulnerable around us? Very likely, and it is this increased standard of difficulty that Christ so memorably calls us to embrace. Remember the Sermon on the Mount? Again and again, Jesus quoted the Law of Moses in Matthew 5: "You have heard that it was said . . ." and then reframed the teaching accord-



ing to love with “But I tell you . . .” We still live under the difficult inspiration of that iconic teaching today.

A robust theology of sin helps us live beyond self-deception. A limited theology of sin often results in a false sense of spiritual maturity. Like the Pharisee in one of Christ’s parables, who looked around in pride and thanked God that he wasn’t like *those* sinners (see Luke 18:11), it is a small step from a narrow understanding of sin straight into the depths of it. In other words, it’s easy to think, *Well, I’m not doing that, so I must be okay*. But sin is not just about “not doing that.” Sin is the negation of love.

When spiritual vitality is measured by sin-avoidance, we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are following Jesus faithfully. But following Jesus is to be measured by love—love for God expressed in love for neighbor. This is the good, beautiful, and kind life. It took me some years to realize this. In fact, I need to be reminded of it often.

When I became a Christian as a twenty-year-old, I was touched by the hope found in the love of God. I heard a preacher proclaim the good news that God cared about my past, present, and future and wanted to rescue me from sin. I received this news with joy and surrendered my life to Jesus. But upon my entry into life with Christ, sin was overwhelmingly presented as violation of a moral code. And as a result, holiness was understood with a similar negativity: as sin-avoidance. Sin was privatized. Confession meant admitting to someone the deep, dark secrets of my soul (and maybe my internet search history). There was little if any connection to seeing love as the repudiation of sin. Instead, sin was the things we did in private, usually things of which we were ashamed.

Of course, God is concerned about every facet of our

lives, including our private lives, down to their most intimate aspects. The invitation to follow Jesus must extend to the moments when we are alone and the decisions we make there. But the gravitational pull in many sectors of Christianity is to spend most of our time focused on our private lives. Sin, functionally, is an activity done in secret.

In my early days as a follower of Christ, I found myself obsessed with sin-avoidance. Spiritual victory was found in not looking at porn (such a low bar for holiness). I took inventory of the music I listened to, the movies I watched, and the company I kept. If I sensed that any of these things would lead me into sin, I did my best to cut it out. On one hand, this sounds like good discipline. But if this is the sole, or even primary, way of understanding sin, we will find ourselves functioning as disciples of the devil. Let me explain.

In his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, poet and theologian Thomas Merton observed the way we function as the devil's disciples:

The devil makes many disciples by preaching against sin. He convinces them of the great evil of sin, induces a crisis of guilt by which "God is satisfied," and after that he lets them spend the rest of their lives meditating on the intense sinfulness and evident reprobation of other men.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, by becoming solely focused on abstaining from sin (defined very narrowly), we live by a crushing moralism that robs us from enjoying God and self-righteously places us above others. This is one of the sad expressions of Christian faith we witness, or perhaps even perpetuate in our own lives.



Because this tends to be the direction of much of our faith, Christianity is regarded as a hypocritical religion by the watching world. The world sees the scrupulosity around individual sin and personal piety without the corresponding commitment to love and justice. When people berate Christians for a lack of love, they demonstrate that they understand the tenets of faith very well. Christianity is about the love of God being expressed through followers of Jesus. It sometimes seems as if the world knows more about our faith than we do. This assessment of Christianity is not the full story, of course. We can't understand much of the goodness of the world we inhabit without the love of Christians over many centuries. But humility is important here. In fact, Jesus had some strong words for religious leaders in his day around this matter:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matthew 23:23)

Listen closely! Jesus didn't dismiss the personal expressions of faith from religious people who offered God 10 percent of their spices (which was Jesus's way of noting how meticulous they were in following the Law). But Jesus called out the hypocrisy of doing so without the corresponding commitment to love. They followed the law but forsook love.

This brings us to an important aspect of understanding



the way sin works. It is a power that turns us inward and seeks to keep us there, which is why we are so fractured, internally and externally. How can one who has become locked into their own soul expect to cultivate a healthy relationship with the wider world?

### TURNED INWARD

There is great value in looking inward. Interior examination is a commitment we all must give ourselves to, through God's grace. But note that his grace turns us inward for the sake of self-awareness, confession, and ultimately love. This process, in the paradoxical beauty of God's way, ends with us growing in our outward love. Sin, however, turns us inward in such a way that we get stuck, horribly so. It causes us to desire an illusion—to center the world on our comfort, security, fear, desire, and personal perspective. It curves us inward, leaving little room for God or anyone else.

So, sin is not just something we do but a power we fall under, a power that curves us into ourselves until we become stuck there. Now once again, ask with me these age-old questions: Why is the world fractured? Why are we so broken? The simple answer is right here: sin. Its results are that we become closed off from others. Sin is destructive because it causes us to live self-seeking lives over and against others. It is never personal, never private. It's what's behind the subtle (and not-so-subtle) grasping for power that marks our world. It's the energy behind the violence, the dynamo beneath all the arrogance, apathy, and hatred.

Sin is at work when those who have experienced undeniable racism are not met with empathy and care but rather



are demonized for naming the problem. Sin is what's at work when we shrug our shoulders in the face of grave injustice. Sin is present when we refuse to treat another with dignity. Sin exists when we injure another with our gossip. Sin is manifested—as we confess in prayer every week in our congregation—in what we have done and in what we have left undone. A story might help us here.

### A LOVE THAT RESISTS *INCURVATUS IN SE*

Living into the eternal life that God promises comes as we give ourselves to the work of love. Eternal life is granted to us by God's free grace, but living into it requires love-saturated lives—love that resists the gravity of *incurvatus in se*.

There's a beloved story Jesus told that has shaped imaginations for thousands of years. It's found in the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel, about a good Samaritan. One day, Jesus was asked how eternal life could be inherited. Once again, he responded with “love” as the way—love for God, and love for one's neighbor.

Jesus told the story of a man who was beaten and left for dead on the road. In his cast of characters, first a priest came along, followed by a Levite (a significant religious leader with the “ideal” social and ethnic pedigree). The two were seemingly on their way to a worship gathering and made no attempt to help this beaten man. But then onto the scene came a Samaritan—an unlikely hero for the audience Jesus was addressing.

But when the Samaritan saw the beaten man, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds,

pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day, he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. “‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have’” (verse 35).

There’s no talk of sin in this story, but we can infer something important: The person who resisted *incurvatus in se* was the Samaritan. In his compassion, advocacy, and generosity, he didn’t turn inward. He gave himself to love—love for God expressed in love for neighbor. Ironically, the religious leaders who knew all the Bible verses about sin were turned in on themselves.

I read this story with fear and trembling, as I was reminded that I can live a so-called morally upright life and still be caught in sin, turning inward. To be caught in sin is usually understood in terms of addictive behavior. But again, let’s broaden our approach. We are also caught in sin when we fail to love. This is what the first few stories in the Bible describe.

## STORIES OF TURNING INWARD

I love a good origin story. It has a way of filling the gaps in knowledge that helps us better understand the heroes we’ve come to love or the villains we’ve come to despise. That’s what the opening pages of Genesis do, not just for an individual but for the entire human race. In these stories, particularly the ones in the first eleven chapters, our collective origin story is told.

The tendency to turn inward—which we all have—is



what makes this world bound to sin. Sin separates us from loving communion with God and with others. This has been the story from the very beginning. A cursory look at three stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis demonstrates this reality. As we study these stories, we will find ourselves in them.

### **Adam and Eve: Turning Inward Through Grasping**

Adam and Eve are tempted by the idea of being like God, knowing good from evil. By this they are enticed to take on what is only God's prerogative: determining what is good from what is evil. More than being made in God's image, they wanted to *be* God. Instead of looking outward and upward for their definitions of right, good, and truth, they looked within, succumbing to a form of grasping, of spiritual greed.

The story follows them, in their greed, from temptation to fall. It is an eternal story. Humans have followed suit ever since. Before that infamous moment of eating the fruit from the tree, they enjoyed loving communion with God. They were naked and unashamed. They lived joyfully free in the presence of the Lord. But as the story goes, their gaze turned inward. At the Serpent's prompting, they pondered the power they could have if they ate from the tree.

To begin with, the tree signified a holy limit. God had placed before them a boundary that was both necessary and out of his love. But soon enough, in the presence of temptation, it became, in the words of Tolkien's magic ring-obsessed character Gollum, "my precious." Desiring the fruit, rationalizing their situation, and ultimately eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a result of sin turning them inward. By the time they sank their

teeth into the fruit, love had already been uprooted. And this turning inward has continued ever since.

Whether the grasping comes in the form of taking land and calling it manifest destiny, whether it's corporations seizing land and exploiting the environment for economic self-interests and calling it innovation, or whether it comes in the form of sexual abuse or in the workaholicism that fractures our families, our world is caught in the sinful trap of aggressive grasping. We turn inward through grasping.

### **Cain and Abel: Turning Inward Through Envy**

At the beginning of Genesis 4, Adam and Eve made love and had a son. Then they had another. All seemed to be going well with “the Addams family.” (See what I did there? It's okay to groan.) I imagine the doting parents. If they were living today, they'd have been taking family portraits, dressing themselves with white tops and khakis. They have a cooing baby on each lap as they grin wide and say cheese. So much life and joy.

Even though they were removed from the garden, they were a family. But then things began to change. The story of sin started with a man and a woman and continued as it was passed down to siblings—a farmer (Cain) and a shepherd (Abel).

As we read on in Genesis, we soon see that the two brothers were very different. Their differences are depicted in their worship. When Abel offered sacrifices, he gave the firstfruits—the very best—and the smoke would go up. This was not Cain's approach. The story says that God was more pleased with Abel's offering, which led to Cain becoming angry and envious. Cain's jealousy turned him inward, leaving him to conclude that only one person could



be a success: him or his brother. That simple. The happy family's collapse began with a fracture that happened inwardly, though soon it was to have bloody outward consequences.

Few of us admit to being envious. Jealousy is too petty a thing to feel proud about, something beneath our dignity. Yet jealousy is one of the most pervasive and destructive forces on the planet and more deeply ingrained in all of us than we usually have the courage to admit.

Here's the thing about envy: We are often envious about only the things that matter most to us. Jealousy reveals the idols of our hearts. For example, I'm a preacher and a writer. When I see someone playing an instrument with skill and beauty, I don't have one envious bone in my body. I admire and receive the gift. Why? Because I'm not a musician. However, when I see another preacher enjoying success or praise, especially someone about my age, I'm not usually enraptured with delight. All too often, my first small and sinful response is envy.

Now, the first "noticing" here is not always bad. But you know you've crossed the line and are on the verge of coveting when the intense longing that often comes from comparison with another person (*I want what they have / to be what they are*) does not help you give thanks or live with more wholeness in your life but rather leads to greater levels of dissatisfaction and disconnection from what you already have. Moreover, it leads to you participating in the most damaging "game" out there: the zero-sum game.

The zero-sum game is at the core of much of our social interactions. It would have us believe that for *me* to truly win, *you* need to unequivocally lose. This is the nature of

political life and the consumer market. The goal in life is not to succeed but to prosper in such a way that clearly delineates me from you. Competition gives birth to conquest; success requires another's elimination. This is at the heart of a world that fails to love well.

Cain's envy produced an imaginary world. That "paradise" could exist only if his brother was eliminated from it. This sin—trying to make outward reality resemble our stunted, cramped inward one—has repeated through the ages. It's the source of our fractured existence, whether through the ethnic cleansings of the Rohingya people in Myanmar, the political animus that feeds off the defeat of one's opponent, or the private desires we harbor for others to fail for us to look good. This way of living marks us—like it did Cain. The "paradise" we thought we'd find never materializes.

### **The Tower of Babel:**

#### **Turning Inward Through Exclusionism**

The final story of turning inward we'll examine relates to the Tower of Babel. By the time we get to this story in Genesis 11, we see how humanity has continued to go its own way, following the tragic trajectory of Adam, Eve, and Cain. The people are said to have been going east (the symbolic direction Adam and Eve were sent after being expelled from Eden, pointing to their distance from God) to build a tower. On the surface, this seems innocent enough. Why is God concerned? It's a tower! As we know, there is no structure that could be built that can take over heaven. God's dwelling place is in a different dimension of reality.

Even so, God saw their efforts as dangerous. One of the



reasons they wanted to build a city and this tower was because they were afraid of being scattered throughout the earth (see verse 4).

So, what's the problem? Why is it wrong to want to stay put? It's a good question. The answer is found in God's commission for them to fill the earth. Earlier in Genesis (1:28), God gave his people the mandate to fill the earth, to show forth his presence throughout the earth. The problem with them building this city is they would rather stay within their homogeneous setting than have their lives intersect with others. Collectively and geographically, they turned inward. Rather than going in faith, they began to stay in pride.

God saw the deep problems this way of life produces. They lived in fear of those who were different, so they created a tower. I read this as a bubble. An echo chamber. The problem with their brand of unity is that it would lead to *uniformity*, and uniformity has a way of producing exclusivity and hierarchies—something we see reenacted daily in expressions of Christian nationalism, racism, ethnocentrism, and sexism. It's seen in the ways social media, through its sophisticated algorithms, turns us in on ourselves. It's expressed in the toxicity of political power plays. While the trappings of such fractures are new, the deeper issue is not.

The “towers” we build are often rooted in the idolatry of self-interest. Whether it comes in the form of “class towers” that separate us from the poor, or “technological towers” that keep us connected to those who see and believe all the things we do, sin has a way of absolutizing our values (especially the ones that were never intended to be absolute) in ways that cause greater fragmentation. In the words of family systems theorist Edwin Friedman, our society is marked by a “herding instinct,”<sup>5</sup> where the forces for to-



getherness triumph over all. The question becomes, *Am I building a tower (that is, a life) that turns me in on myself?* If I am, I'm in spiritual danger.

## UNCURVING OURSELVES

Grasping. Envy. Exclusionism. Our collective origin story, seen in the first part of the first book of the Bible, is marked by these realities. They remind us that sin is not just something we do but a power we are under, a power turning us inward, but inward in the wrong way.

This leads to an important question: How do we “uncurve” ourselves? To be uncurved is to be rooted in love, orienting our lives toward the good, beautiful, and kind lives God dreams for us, but the task sounds insurmountable. And it is insurmountable. For *us*. The weight of sin presses us inward. We are caught under its oppressive power.

The world apart from God is in sin, and we can't rescue ourselves. We can't save ourselves. We can't work or legislate our way out of it. We can't educate ourselves out of its grip. We don't overcome it through progressive achievements or by moral consistency. The antidote for sin is not found by looking to the left or the right. It's in a power outside of ourselves: the Cross of Christ.

Christian faith compels us to say in one breath that a fragmenting power is at work within each of us and between all of us, and in the next breath announce that there's a way out. As the Swiss theologian Karl Barth said, “The reality of sin cannot be known or described except in relation to the One who has vanquished it.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, whenever we talk about sin, it's a good practice to immedi-



ately announce that it has been overcome by Christ. This is the good news!

The gospel is the good news that God's kingdom has come near in Jesus Christ, and through his life, death, resurrection, and enthronement, the powers of sin and death no longer have the last word. On the cross and in his resurrection, Jesus took on sin. The sin that has ravaged our personal lives. The sin that has been the source of so much heartache throughout history. The sin that requires unequivocal judgment. Jesus conquered it. In his so doing, we are forgiven through his blood and empowered by the Spirit to live in loving union with God and with our neighbor, anticipating the fullness of our union with the triune God at the end of history. This good news is to free us from the inward turn. The weight of sin has been carried on the shoulders of Jesus, and his Spirit animates our lives, "uncurving" us every day.

Later in this book, we will explore further how this process becomes embodied in us, but for now, a brief word about a significant spiritual practice is in order. For those who trust in Jesus's finished work on the cross, we have the great joy of living within his love. As we open ourselves to God's presence, his love orients us in a new direction held steady by one of the most important spiritual practices in the Christian life: confession.

### THE PRACTICE OF CONFESSION OF SIN

Confession uncurves us. If we believe that sin has been handled definitively in Christ and that the full victory over it will occur when he fully renews the world, what do we do

in the meantime? There are many good answers to this question, but I doubt you'll find a better starting point than confession.

Until we consistently live from a place of humility, confessing our sins before God and one another, we will find ourselves gradually turning inward. This is why we need the wisdom of Barbara Brown Taylor, who provocatively said that sin is our only hope. What she meant by this is that “when we see how we have turned away from God, then and only then do we have what we need to begin turning back. *Sin is our only hope*, the fire alarm that wakes us up to the possibility of true repentance.”<sup>7</sup>

Followers of Christ establish our moral credibility in the world by routinely and fearlessly confessing and repenting of sin. And we lose our credibility by refusing to name our sins. This is the paradox of faith. To confess our sins doesn't mean obsessing over our mistakes. To confess our sins—especially together in a community—is an act of solidarity. It's a practice reminding us that we are all on equal footing, all in need of grace; that we all have sinned and have been sinned against; that we are in the same broken family.

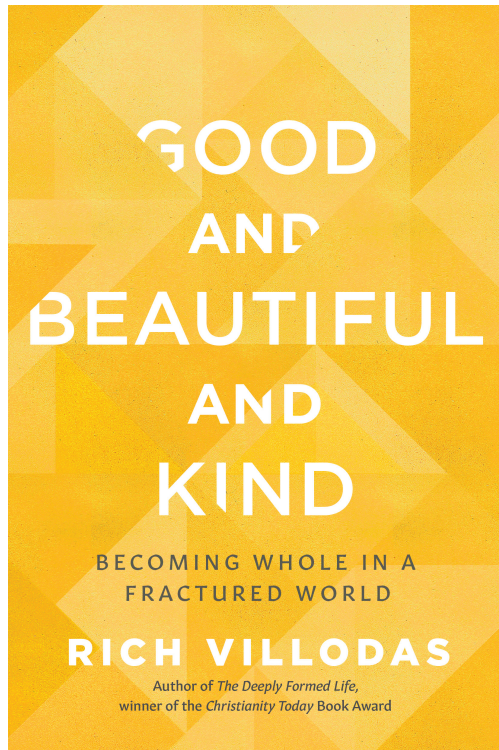
Every Sunday in our worship at New Life Fellowship Church, we take a moment to recall the previous week in the silence of our hearts. We name our failures and shortcomings and then confess aloud a prayer that ties us together in our weaknesses. Whenever the Lenten season comes around, we observe Ash Wednesday. It's the annual reminder that we are far more weak, frail, broken, and marked by sin than we think. It's also the reminder that God is far more gracious, merciful, present, and loving than we can believe.

This practice of confession in our worship gatherings



frees us to confess our sins the other six days of the week. When we scold our children in ways that harm them, confession forms in us the humility to ask for their pardon. When after a heated exchange with someone that leads to wounding words, we limit sin's power by confessing our carelessness and requesting grace from the person. That is how the world moves toward wholeness—not by our covering up our sins and mistakes, but by lovingly acknowledging them before God and one another. This is the starting point for a good and beautiful and kind life.

And yet the call to this kind of life has another dimension we must pay attention to. The world is not just fractured because we turn inward. It's fractured because of an unseen enemy. And this enemy is legion.



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