

SCARLET  
HILTIBIDAL

*You're the*  
~~WORST~~  
~~PERSON~~  
*in the*  
WORLD

Why It's the Best News Ever that You Don't  
Have It Together, You Aren't Enough, and  
You Can't Fix It on Your Own

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Dedicated to my dad—the hero in the blue Jeep



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# Introduction

**H**ow does a book called *You're the Worst Person in the World* come to be? I'll explain. You see, when you get a book published, you get all these thrilling emails with subject lines like, "Cover Sketches," containing book cover concepts based on drawings you and your eight-year-old scribbled on copy paper and sent to the publisher. And you get to say things like, "Hey, Devin. So sorry to bother you. Again, I cannot stress how sorry I am to email you, once more, about that second splotch on the right. It's just . . . could that splotch on the right possibly be less pink? What about periwinkle? Is periwinkle a grayish blue? I mean, I know I said 'raspberry,' but I don't think I actually understood what color raspberries were . . . and maybe while you're at it, could you ask the designer to make the drawing of the girl's face a little more defined in the chin area? Her chin is just a little homely to me. Maybe give her a dimple or a more pronounced jawline? But not too pronounced. Maybe like Angelina Jolie in the jaw, but a little softer. If her chin could just give off the vibe of a sweet, smart, attractive, God-fearing young woman who has her whole life ahead of her . . . yeah . . . that's what it needs to be . . .



Can a chin convey humility and wholesomeness while still being striking? I think so . . .”

When I was going back and forth (kind of) like that for my first book, *Afraid of All the Things*, I sent the color palette options to my friend. One cover option was a deep red, one was crisp white, and (the eventual winning) one was the color of mustard.

When we had yet to decide on the cover color, I said to my friend, “What do you think about the dark red one?”

She looked at me and said, “Scarlet, I’m so excited about this book. Honestly, I think the red one (book about fear with a syringe and fang icon on the front) makes it look a little bit scary rather than what you’re going for . . . funny and lighthearted . . . but I mean, red, purple, striped, whatever. Literally, if you put out a book that was just a blank white cover with the words YOU’RE THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD printed in block letters, I would still be SO EXCITED.”

Katie’s a great friend.

I laughed really hard and then I stopped laughing and said, “Oh my goodness. Katie. That has to be a book.” I thought it would be funny, seeing a Christian book with that title sitting on a shelf or a coffee table:

*You’re the Worst Person in the World*

But the more I thought about it, the more I felt I needed to write it. I thought about how fundamental that concept is to my faith. How it’s kind of the whole thing about being a Christian—understanding my own worstness and my

need for saving. Believing that my only way to salvation is through the one who calls Himself “a friend of sinners.”

We all so badly want to be *the best*. Right? I mean, have you done what I spent most of my entire life doing? Have you hustled and striven to be the best at absolutely everything? Or maybe you’re not that type . . . but, even so, we’re all trying to be the best at *something*. Serious question—has it worked? I’m guessing not. If you’re honest, you are probably tired of trying so hard to be the best everything all the time for everyone. You are probably exhausted. And man, I get that. I spent most every second of my existence striving to be the best too.

I tried to be the best sub sandwich maker and the best wife and the best mom and even the best epitaph planner (more on all that stuff later). And here’s the truth—as much as I’d like to be shiny and awesome, I’m not the best at any of those things. Not even a little bit. In fact, all the things I could possibly strive for and strive to be the best at, I’m pretty much terrible at them. The worst, maybe. So, if you ever feel like that—like you’re tired of hustling to cover up the fact that you’re not great at all the stuff you’re supposed to be great at—this book is for you.

And it’s more than just a moment to commiserate together, though I’m sure we’ll do plenty of that. It’s also an offering—something to point you to the God-man who wants to give the absolute best to the very worst of us.

I loved Katie’s joke—a book called *You’re the Worst Person in the World*. I thought it could make us laugh, but also help us all stop faking like we’re

super-perfect-and-successful-and-the-greatest-most-together-people-ever long enough to take a big, deep breath and admit just how *untogether* and awful we are. Why? So we can all learn to rest in the goodness of Jesus instead of in the “goodness” of ourselves. That’s the paradox of being a believer—whether it’s you, me, Katie, or anyone else, there really is no rest until we know we’re the worst.

But here’s a problem I have: even though I do believe I’m the worst, I don’t always *feel* like the worst in the world. Sure, I know I am a sinner, in theory. And I know that knowing that is important. James 4:10 says, “Humble yourselves before the Lord . . .” Paul famously and painfully says in Romans 3:10: “There is no one righteous, not even one,” and then his description of us only gets (much) more unflattering from there.

But it’s kind of difficult to humble yourself, and it’s hard to buy into your brokenness—especially during those seasons you feel like you’re doing great (or at least decent compared to the next person). That happens in the Christian life. People often meet Jesus at rock bottom. Then they start to follow Him. They pursue pleasure in Him. They strive for holiness. They experience change. They taste and see that He is good. They know the crazy joy of their salvation. Incredibly, the Holy Spirit begins to transform them and produce the fruit of the spirit in their lives, the things of Galatians 5:22–23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Believers can start to look more like Jesus, by the work of Jesus, and we should all shout for joy about that. But

at the same time, because we're still fallen and weak and dealing with that thing the Bible calls the "flesh," which is bent toward sinfulness and selfishness, the enemy and even our own hearts tempt us to take credit for the work of God in our lives. Then we stop thinking about the glory of God and start thinking about the glory of me. Then we start to follow our hearts over and above Jesus. We pursue pleasure in ourselves. We strive for comfort in wrong places. We believe lies instead of truth. We taste and think that we are good. We slip away from the joy of our salvation toward the fragile "joys" of self-congratulation or pleasing the people of the moment in the ways of whatever works. It is truly a tale as old as time. Brokenness leads to rescue leads to blessing leads to pride, which leads to somehow convincing our recently broken selves that, "Everything you need is within you" and "You got this all on your own" and "You're awesome!"

Those messages are the exact opposite of what God, the One who has always been and always will be, says. The world says, "Just do you!" and the Bible says, "It is not I, but Christ" (see 1 Cor. 15:10). The world says, "Change your life and take charge." God says, "Lose your life and take up your cross" (see Matt. 16:24–25). Our culture says, "You are the way to the life of your dreams." Jesus says, "You are the worst, and I am the way, but I love you and I have dreams you haven't even thought of yet."

It's a weird thing—being a Christian today (and probably any other day). Every moment, you can either hit your knees and depend on God and make the hard, humble

choice of submitting to the Bible that will convict you and lead you to do uncomfortable things for the Kingdom. Or you can try to “be good” by yourself. Only one way tells you that, left to yourself, you really are the worst—and yet, oddly enough, that’s the only way that works. So, thank You, Jesus. And thank you, Katie.

I want to remind myself and remind you that believing we are the worst and remembering that Jesus is the best can—strange as it sounds—help us be free and full of joy. That’s what this book is about. When we are poor, Jesus can make us rich. When we see our sin, we can see Jesus is our Savior. When we know we are sheep, we are ready for the arm of the Shepherd.

Matthew 5:3 says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.” Weirdly and wonderfully, believing the reality that we are poor in spirit leads us back to the life we were made for. Blessed are the poor in spirit. We’ll look at this in section 1.

In 1 Timothy 1:15 (NKJV), Paul says, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” He once even asked: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24). Of course, mere verses later he answers: “There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set [me] FREE from the law of sin and death” (Rom. 8:1–2, emphasis mine). That is the thrust of section 2. In Jesus, the chiefs of sinners are most poised to be free. And don’t we deeply want to be free?

Isaiah 53:6 reminds us: “We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all.” Only the sheep need the sacrifice of the Shepherd. Sought after are the sheep that have gone astray. That is the focus of section 3. We are weak and lost and ruined without a Shepherd, but we have One who is historically good. He wants us to enjoy His goodness.

This book is about acknowledging and understanding our brokenness, feeling the weight of our sin, and exhaling in our status as “sinners” and “sheep” as the “worst people on earth” who have been mercifully rescued and impossibly loved by the best person who has ever lived—Jesus.



*Section 1*

# Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

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*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for  
the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”*

—Matthew 5:3





## Chapter One

# Worst Epitaph Planner

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*“The only people who will ever come  
to Jesus are those who know they are  
spiritually and morally crippled.”<sup>1</sup>*

—John Piper

I couldn't wait to start my seventh-hour study hall, so I could get to work on my gravestone.

My English teacher, Mrs. Yates, had given us an assignment. She said, “I want you to write your own epitaph. Think about how you want to live your life and what you'd like on your gravestone. Then turn it in on Wednesday.”

Once I was settled in my desk, without hesitation, I proceeded to write, in poorly executed Old English jargon, “An Author's Epitaph.”

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<sup>1</sup> John Piper, “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit Who Mourn,” *Desiring God*, February 2, 1986, [www.desiringgod.org/messages/blessed-are-the-poor-in-spirit-who-mourn](http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/blessed-are-the-poor-in-spirit-who-mourn).

*Herein therefore and heretofore lies Scarlet Elizabeth. She utilized her feathered quill to something something something . . . and etched her mark on something something . . . shone as a beacon of literary blah blah blah . . .*

I'm barely exaggerating. It was embarrassing, and it's so unfortunate that my mom saved it and gave it to me in a scrapbook a few years ago, but it is not why I'm the worst. I am the worst because I'm still like that.

I mean, honestly, the same person who wrote "An Author's Epitaph" is inside of me right now. I catch glimpses of her every once in a while, like, for example, when that horrible Facebook feature called "Memories" reminds me about what I posted six years ago, eight years ago . . . two weeks ago.

I often squint my eyes and turn my head just far enough so that I can barely see what I wrote, while making sure I fully click on the "Delete forever, please, for the love of everything and maybe this is just a sign that it's time to delete my whole Facebook account" button enough times for me to feel like it's really gone.

So, freshman year of high school, I clearly, *intensely*, wanted to be a writer. I wanted it in an awkward way. I wanted it in a self-serving way. But I imagined myself like Jo in *Little Women*. I wanted to be scrappy and impressive and clever and adored by the hottest guy in the film. Mostly, I wanted people to think I was great, you know?

Do you find that temptation in your heart sometimes too? That's what shines through my headstone draft. That's what still shows up in my Facebook feed. *If people just think I'm great, I know I'll finally feel at peace.* But it isn't true. I know because I've been listening to that lie and finding it false for my whole life.

In my twenties, I read *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents: Who They Are, What They Want, How to Win Them Over*. I read it multiple times, so I knew (thanks to Jeff) that the statistics for achieving my goal were not in my favor.

He said that to get published, the first step was to find a literary agent. He also said, only a handful of pages in, that agents rejected 98 percent of what is pitched to them.<sup>2</sup> But all that meant to my manic ambition was: I HAVE A TWO-PERCENT CHANCE OF BEING SO THE BEST THAT I GET AN AGENT! I GOT THIS.

For long seasons of my life, this goal owned me. It was often idolatry, and like all idols, it was crushing my soul. And here's the thing—my be-the-best-at-book-proposals pursuit might have looked like American go-getterness from the outside, but on the inside, it was much darker.

As Jack Black said in his brilliant performance as Nacho Libre: "I wanted a taste of de glory!" He also said, "Save me a piece o' that corn, for later," and, "Those eggs were a lie!"

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<sup>2</sup> Jeff Herman, *Jeff Herman's Guide to Book Publishers, Editors & Literary Agents: Who They Are, What They Want, How to Win Them Over*, 28th ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2018), 18–19.

(Neither of those last two quotes mean anything deep, but I recite them frequently and wanted to share.)

If you remember the Nacho Libre story, it's Jack Black's misguided belief in himself that moves the story along. His overconfidence is *\*chef's kiss.\** And just watching him dressed as a monk for an hour and a half, talking about his dream of being a luchador (wrestler) and getting to have all the "free creams and lotions" is fantastic. However, "wanting a taste of the glory" is not a funny thing when it's the real desire in your heart. Whether you are a fictional luchador in fictional stretchy pants or a very real person reading this book right now in very real stretchy pants, daydreaming about some season of life where you'll be some version of "bigger and better" than you are right now, know this: pursuing glory isn't just a useless, temporary pursuit. It has eternal, soul-level significance.

When I lived mostly wishing to be admired, I spent every moment constantly striving and constantly failing and constantly wanting and constantly empty.

And my ambition was not just about feeling satisfied or unsatisfied with life. My pursuit of self-glory also left me feeling panicked.

I woke up each day desperately pursuing praise from the people around me, and finding that even when I won it, the praise left me more miserable than I was before when I anticipated how great it would feel. Even when I heard something complimentary about something I'd done or written from a Mrs. Yates type or a literary agent, I'd immediately crash from the high and feel disappointed that

the firework feeling of the compliment or achievement fizzled out faster than when it came out of the person's mouth.

## Classic Paul Wessel-isms

Growing up, my dad, Paul, had all these catchphrases he'd repeat over and over to either be funny or get something important into our brains. Many of his phrases were quotes from movies:

"Good luck finding a DJ who can move and shake like THIS!"

But most were safety related:

"Be careful—put on your safety belt—watch what's going on around you—be alert—nothing good happens after midnight."

Can you tell he was a SWAT cop/police helicopter pilot?

He gave daily safety speeches. Even today, any time I'm driving after dark, even if it's just an early 5:00 p.m. sunset, I hear his voice in my head: "Nothing good happens after midnight—nothing good happens after midnight—nothing good . . ." and my danger radar kicks into high gear.

Listen—parents—the repetitive speeches *work*. They are effective. And hey, I'm glad he raised us to be cautious, but the most important safety speeches he gave my sister and me were about the safety of our hearts.

"All sin leads to heartache."

He said that ten million bajillion times. "All sin leads to heartache."

Before I even cared about or understood what that meant, he loved me enough to teach me that anything I did or pursued outside of Jesus would hurt me.

“All sin leads to heartache.”

Read that sentence again in the deep, serious voice of the officer who got his pinky shot off and once killed a bad guy before the bad guy murdered someone else. Then, it'll really sink in.

“All sin leads to heartache.”

Honestly, when he used to say that to me, I had one foot out the door, on the way to a party or a date or somewhere I'd have to make decisions that had the potential to hurt me on a deep level. I just wanted him to hurry up and finish saying his dad things so I could leave and feel independent and shiny and grown-up for a few hours.

He knew that. He knew I wasn't thoughtfully pondering his fatherly wisdom. But he kept saying it. He always said it. He said it so many times.

“All sin leads to heartache.”

Kind of purse your lips when you're saying it too, and push your eyebrows deep down into your nose, to really get the full Paul Wessel effect.

Back then, I thought he was referring to drinking and smoking and doing things with boys. Well, duh, he was. But it was more than that. Now, I get it.

He wasn't trying to keep me from doing the three *bad things* I may have wanted to do. He was trying to keep me from the destruction that *any* form of sin causes. He didn't just mean STAY AWAY FROM DRUGS. He meant

STAY AWAY from self-obsessing and envying and deceiving others and performing for other people's praise. He meant STAY AWAY from gossip and greed and laziness and pride.

He knew then what I know now: anything you go after with your whole heart rather than going after the Lord, be it a good grade or a good time, will disappoint and crush you. What he was really saying was: "Stay away from things that will take you away from joy." He wanted me far from sin, because he wanted me close to Jesus. He wanted me to know what it's like to be happy in Jesus.

In Matthew 16:24–26 (ESV), Jesus was talking to His disciples and He said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?"

Those couple of sentences recorded more than two thousand years ago used to make me so uncomfortable. They still do, sometimes. I think it's because I can go pretty long stretches lying to myself by telling myself that because of x, y, and z, I'm *not* the *worst* person in the world. Maybe not the best, but certainly not the worst. But just like Nacho Libre's eagle eggs, they are lies.



## The Pink Slip That Crushed Me

My pursuit of being the best person in the world didn't start in Mrs. Yates's English class. It began on my first day of first grade.

My teacher laid out the rules and expectations and I hung on her every word. She said, "Class, keep your hands folded," so I flexed my arms so tight on my desk and folded my hands with such resolve, there could be no question about whether or not I was the best six-year-old student who had ever sat in a desk anywhere at any time.

The year started out amazing. Sure, my arms were sore from the constant flexing, but as I looked around, it was unignorable that my rule-following went above and beyond the attempts of my degenerate classmates.

Ms. Jay had a simple, clear punishment/reward system. There was a huge bulletin board attached to the wall on the left side of the classroom covered in clear plastic envelopes. Every student had a labeled one. And stored in big manila envelopes were red slips and pink slips. If you got a red slip in your little clear pocket, that meant you were doing a great job.

I think it goes without saying that my envelope boasted an ever-present abundance of red construction paper slips.

The delinquents got pink slips. It happened all the time. Someone would talk without permission or forget their homework or get out of their seat without asking, and Ms. Jay would send those scumbags on the shame walk to pull a pink slip and put it on display for all to see.

*How did these people live with themselves?* I wondered.

Unrelated: I often did my handwriting seatwork with such ferocity that my pencil would tear a hole in the paper.

First grade was going GREAT for me, as you can tell, until my enthusiasm to ace my assignment overpowered my meticulous rule-following. I'll never forget it.

Suddenly, in the middle of writing a sentence on my paper, a very important question came to my mind. A question that I would ask teachers every year at some point up until I graduated. A question so important, it had to be asked, and asked immediately.

Yep. You guessed it. "Are we supposed to write to the margin or to the edge of the paper?"

And here's what happened—all in slow motion, of course, because *trauma*. I raised my hand, the question so urgent I could almost feel it spilling from my lips.

*How am I supposed to do this seatwork appropriately if I'm not sure where to end a line? IS IT THE MARGIN? IS IT THE END OF THE PAPER!?* THIS IS AN EMERGENCY.

That's when it happened. As my hand was in the air, I said, "Ms. Jay . . . ?"

Sound came from my mouth before I was called on.

Devastatingly, I, Scarlet Elizabeth, was violating a rule. I broke protocol. I did something wrong. Life, as I knew it, was over. I never got to ask my question about the seatwork parameters because I had to take the long, tragic walk to the bulletin board to put a PINK SLIP into an envelope.

Pink. No mercy.

There was a lone pink slip in my clear wall pocket. A Scarlet Letter. A visible, tangible sign to the onlooking world saying, "THIS GIRL IS A FAILURE."

I try to look at Ms. Jay with grace goggles, but I mean . . . if she could have seen through my little body and recognized my internal desperation to be perfect, I feel like she would have let the pink slip slide.

Also, to this day, I do not know whether she wanted my work to go to the margin or to the end of the paper. That's just an unresolved question I have to live with.

The next part of this story is not exaggerated at all. You can ask my parents.

I responded to this situation as if my teacher had stood me in front of the room and led my six-year-old classmates to perform a Christian school flogging.

I got home and screamed. I writhed. I cried. I barricaded myself under my bed and refused to go to school.

The next part is a blur. My fuzzy memory tells me I went on strike for weeks. But I asked my parents the other day and they said, "Oh, no. You went right back to school." I don't know how my parents removed my body from under my bed or how they got my pink-slip-PTSD-ed self into a chair in the school guidance counselor's office. But there I was, being looked at lovingly by Mrs. Cahn, an older woman who had the look of Mother Goose and the demeanor of Little Bo Peep.

"Scarlet," she said gently, "you know, you don't have to be perfect."

But my heart and head whispered, *Mrs. Bo Peep is wrong.*

## What Does It All Mean?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.” (Matt. 5:3)

I remember the first time I read that verse in my little blue leather Bible—Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . *What does that mean?*

*Blessed . . . does that mean rewarded? Poor in spirit . . . doesn't poor mean broke or sad? My parents seem to have all the money we need to eat and live and buy things. Does that mean I won't get to have the “kingdom of heaven”? Because we aren't poor enough?* And what IS the kingdom of heaven, anyway? Like, a palace? I don't even like fancy things . . .

These Beatitudes, as they're called in the heading, didn't make sense to me, right out of the gate. That first one. Like, what in the world?

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Apparently, in the original Greek language this verse was written in, the word *blessed* simply means “happy.”

Happy are the poor in spirit.

That doesn't seem right, right?

How often do we associate happiness with poverty? How can people who are lacking be people who are happy? But Jesus wasn't talking about people living paycheck to

paycheck or collecting unemployment. Jesus clarified: happy are the poor *in spirit*.

*The Holman New Testament Commentary* puts it this way: “The beginning of repentance is the recognition of one’s spiritual bankruptcy—one’s inability to become righteous on one’s own. The blessing or happiness that belongs to the poor in spirit is because such a person is, by his admission, already moving toward participating in God’s kingdom plan, acknowledging his need for a source of salvation outside himself.”<sup>3</sup>

The commentator goes on to list specific Old Testament scriptures that would have been familiar to the first hearers of Jesus’s sermon and the first readers of Matthew’s book.

- “I am oppressed and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my helper and my deliverer; my God, do not delay” (Ps. 40:17).
- “But as for me—poor and in pain—let your salvation protect me, God. I will praise God’s name with song and exalt him with thanksgiving. . . . For the LORD listens to the needy and does not despise his own who are prisoners. Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas

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<sup>3</sup> Max Anders and Stuart K. Weber, *Holman New Testament Commentary: Matthew*, vol. 1 (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012). Retrieved from <https://app.wordsearchbible.lifeway.com>.

and everything that moves in them” (Ps. 69:29–30, 33–34).

- “For the High and Exalted One, who lives forever, whose name is holy, says this: ‘I live in a high and holy place, and with the oppressed and lowly of spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and revive the heart of the oppressed” (Isa. 57:15).
- “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and freedom to the prisoners” (Isa. 61:1).
- “My hand made all these things, and so they all came into being. This is the LORD’s declaration. I will look favorably on this kind of person: one who is humble, submissive in spirit, and trembles at my word. . . . You who tremble at his word, hear the word of the LORD: ‘Your brothers who hate and exclude you for my name’s sake have said, “Let the LORD be glorified so that we can see your joy!”’ But they will be put to shame” (Isa. 66:2, 5).

See that? Blessed are the poor in spirit. Happy are those people who recognize the reality of their needy position.

We are not aspiring superstars. “A taste of de glory” is a pointless pursuit. The truth is this—we are poor. We are wretches, not winners. We are sinners, not successful. We can ignore it, but we can’t change it. Because whether or not we live like it, that’s what we are in our fallen state apart from God.

We, you and I, are needy people. It has been this way since the very beginning when Adam and Eve rebelled against God and broke the world and the human heart. We, and all who have breathed since that day, are born in sin. Mrs. Bo Peep was right. We don’t have to be perfect. We can’t be. And yet still God says to the rebels: *You can be blessed. You can be happy. Only believe that you are what you really are and I will give you the kingdom of heaven.* What a gift. What a God. And in God’s upside-down kingdom, when we understand we are poor, that’s when we’re primed to experience the joy and peace only He can give us.

## How to Be Happy According to Google

So, “happy” are the poor in spirit. “Happy” are people who don’t strive for success and pre-pen their own epitaph to reflect a life impressively lived. “Happy” are those people.

I just googled “How to be happy.” The first thing that popped up was an article from Healthline.com, which, I’m not going to lie, is a website I visit quite frequently due to my intense hypochondria (see my first book, *Afraid of All*

*the Things*). The article I found listed “25 Habits to Add to Your Routine” for a happier life.<sup>4</sup> The suggestions were practical. Things like . . . smile . . . exercise . . . sleep . . . breathe . . . be grateful . . .

To quote Olaf, “All good things . . . all good things . . .” (I have three young daughters. *Frozen* movies are an important point of reference for me.)

But articles like the Healthline one aren’t super helpful when you’re either A) doing all those habits already and still aren’t happy, or B) completely unmotivated to do any of the habits and therefore still aren’t happy.

Articles like that are also not the silver bullet because all the things they list off can only provide some *momentary* happiness. No offense, Healthline; you’ve kept me company and made me feel comforted and informed about non-life-threatening reasons for numbness and coldness in my extremities on many a night. But there is so much more.

Barnabas Piper published this great book called *Hoping for Happiness*. In it, Barnabas writes about expectation and about what we’re looking for happiness in and where to actually find it. I assumed I had the answers to these questions down. But man, I needed that book. I am so quick to look for happiness in things I know won’t give me lasting or true happiness because of how good I know they’ll make me feel in the moment.

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Pietrangelo, “How to Be Happy: 25 Habits to Add to Your Routine,” Healthline, January 15, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/how-to-be-happy>.



The thing that this book helped me understand is that the pursuit of temporary pleasures isn't an evil thing, in and of itself. Barnabas calls this idea "evange-guilt." I bet some of you are nodding already.

We long for temporary pleasure, and so we pursue it and then we feel guilty for pursuing it. We know we're eternal beings meant to pursue happiness in Jesus. But we so often binge Netflix instead of our Bibles. We so often pursue accolades in the form of employment promotions or Instagram likes, when we know we could and should pursue Christlike lowliness. We know God tells us *that* will unlock our happiness and ground our identities, but we just kinda don't wanna. You know?

Here's what Barnabas says about our pursuit of happiness: "It's not easy to take a step back and examine our motivations like this. But it is necessary. It's how we know whether we are living for the right things, hoping for the right things, and expecting the right things. And it's why Ecclesiastes is in the Bible, to sort out our priorities in big, blunt sweeps."<sup>5</sup>

The specific passage Barnabas is referring to here is Ecclesiastes 3:10–15 (ESV). Here's what it says:

I have seen the business that God has given  
to the children of man to be busy with. He  
has made everything beautiful in its time.  
Also, he has put eternity into man's heart,

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<sup>5</sup> Barnabas Piper, *Hoping for Happiness* (Surrey, UK: The Good Book Company, 2020), 35–36.

yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man.

I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

Barnabas goes on: “This passage shows us that everything is beautiful in its time, but not everything is beautiful forever. Not everything is meant to give lasting happiness. Rather, temporal things are meant to point toward eternal happiness. We enjoy them richly now, because they are good, while also seeking to ‘set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth’ (Col. 3:2 ESV).”<sup>6</sup>

Man. That really got me. I have a tendency to lump my sinful, self-centered desires (e.g., let me be obsessed with being a beloved success story) with temporary but non-sinful desires (e.g., chips and queso, laughing with friends,

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<sup>6</sup> Barnabas, *Hoping for Happiness*, 35–36.

painting my nails and then peeling the nail polish off—am I the only who thinks this is *so* satisfying?).

Queso and laughter and, yes, even nail polish peeling is not evil. Enjoying life can be a form of worship when we are enjoying life with gratitude to the Creator of all enjoyment. But seeking pleasure takes a dark turn when we seek it from a place of self-worship.

Our enemy wants us to seek pleasure the way he sought pleasure. We can read a little about Satan's pleasure-seeking in Isaiah 14:12–14: "Shining morning star, how you have fallen from the heavens! You destroyer of nations, you have been cut down to the ground. You said to yourself, 'I will ascend to the heavens; I will set up my throne above the stars of God. I will sit on the mount of the gods' assembly, in the remotest parts of the North. I will ascend above the highest clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'"

Satan hoped for happiness and satisfaction by trying to "set up [his] throne above the stars of God." Does that hit you with conviction? Because it does, me.

It's not a cute thing to admit, but I think a lot of us are guilty of the icky narcissism this generation gets accused of so often. We can tend to think it's okay, because everyone's doing it.

I'm just going to get really honest here. Have you ever been on your phone looking at *your own* posts? This is something I may or may not have caught myself doing in situations like, when I met someone new and wanted to try and objectively predict what they might think of me based on a profile or a Google search. Instead of being caught

up in who *they* are, what *their* story is, and how *they* are doing, I fixate on who they think *I* am, what *my* story looks like in front of them, and how *I* am doing in that moment. And if this is how I treat a brand-new acquaintance, what does that say about how the rest of the relationship will go should we actually become good friends? *What kind of start is that for a friendship?* We *are* narcissists, you guys. It is awful. So, what do we do about it? Delete the Internet? Amish up and learn to plant gardens instead of taking self-ies? Avoid “Screen Time” data because we want to go to sleep at night feeling like we’re the best?

## Having the Best Bad Laugh

It’s really hard to accept being the worst when everything in us wants to be the best. Even if you’re not the over-achieving type, we’re all trying to be the best at something. In fact, back when I was in high school, I won an award for worst laugh, and I was so proud. I was the best bad laughter in my whole school.

In my teen years and early twenties, I pursued bestness in the categories of beauty, weirdness, and . . . actually, that’s pretty much it.

At some point in high school, weirdness, friendliness, and cheerleading became my cocktail for positive attention—making people laugh or smile, having them know me for something, I don’t know. I just know that the more people that laughed at how “weird” or “quirky” I was, the more I embraced that identity.

I don't really even know how the laugh thing happened. I think I laughed weird by accident this one time and a boy I liked thought the sound I made was funny, so I kept doing the strange sound for the next five to twenty years.

It's not difficult for me now, as a thirty-something with eyelid skin that's not what it once was, to feel cringey when reflecting on the years I thought my "weirdness" was special or necessary. Because the older I get, the more I see that everyone is weird in some way. And it's not like realizing that made me stop striving for praise from people. I know that what was once weirdness is now relational peace with people, or success in my career or parenting. What I pursued when I was younger was bestness at something and what I still sometimes pursue, even to this day, is bestness at more "mature" things.

I don't want Jesus to be someone I admire from a distance while using all my energy to make myself into something others might call "the best." I don't want Jesus to be my sounding board or a side-gig for my identity. I want Him to take me over, because I know that it's the poor in spirit who are happy. It's the ones who recognize their worstness and exalt God's bestness who are free from believing the lies and free from the dead end of self-promotion and self-doubt and self-centeredness. We can lay down our best and find joy.

## What Our Pursuit Really Is

Adopt the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited. Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross. For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth—and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)

The whole point is that Jesus, God in human flesh, came into the world and fulfilled the law. HE lived it out perfectly. HE paid the price for all the rule-breaking we do. HE humbled Himself and went to the cross. HE made a way for us to be restored as friends of God, reversing the brokenness that existed since the days of Adam and Eve. HE is the One who is highly exalted. HE is the One all will bow before. It's not up to us to DO LIFE RIGHT. We can't. You can't. Please believe me, you can't do life right. It's too hard, there's too much, and we're too weak. What we have to get right is recognizing Who is worthy

of worship. And as much as we want to lay our heads on pillows reassuring ourselves that we're "doing the best we can," peace with God actually comes from being reassured by the opposite of that.

If I'm being honest with myself right now, I'm not doing the best I can.

I looked at my phone too much today.

I thought about spending money on stuff I want, but don't need, too much today.

I took actions in an effort to make myself comfortable, rather than taking actions to comfort others today.

And today was one of my better days.

Like, I did most of the stuff that makes me feel like I'm good. And avoided most of the stuff that makes me feel like I'm bad. But, under the surface, I know. Under the surface, I crave to be recognized and admired and thought highly of more than I crave to serve and love. I need a better way. I need Jesus. And thank God, I have Him.

For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6)

## A Better Epitaph—A Happy Worm

In 1986, the year I was born, John Piper preached a beautiful sermon called "Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit Who Mourn."

In it, he talked about what “poor in spirit” actually means. He said that Jesus came to replace this idea of self-esteem and self-reliance with God-reliance and submissiveness to Him.

Self-reliance is such a difficult lie for me to dismiss. I tend to be independent. I hate asking for help. I want to do and be and succeed and depend only on myself. I want to tear up the pink slip and chisel my headstone and convince the world I’m great. As an American, that desire could be seen as admirable. But, in reality, that tendency leads me away from the One who puts breath in my lungs and ideas in my head and energy in my body each day. That desire moves me farther from the truth and farther from the only real happiness I can have.

To say, “I don’t need anyone” or “I got this” is to lie to yourself.

It is only when we recognize that we are, whether we like it or not, completely dependent beings, that we are able to hold fast to real hope. The truth is that a tombstone with only the words “prolific author” etched on it would be a tragedy.

In this John Piper sermon, he talks about a man named William Carey. Carey was a British missionary to India who did a lot of amazing things. He founded the English Baptist Missionary Society in 1792. He translated the Bible into six languages. SIX. And parts of it into 290 other languages. He suffered health problems throughout his life and still managed to do all that. Reading his bio, I’d assume his epitaph would read something like my ninth-grade



attempts at one, but even better because he accomplished so much more than even my most far-fetched goals back then. But his gravestone reads differently than you'd expect for someone who did so many good things for the world. Someone who left such a legacy.

Here's what's on his gravestone . . .

WILLIAM CAREY

Born August 17th, 1761

Died June 9th, 1834

A wretched, poor, and helpless worm,  
On Thy kind arms I fall.

A helpless worm in the kind arms of God. May we all be so happy.