

BLOOD

CARL KUHL

STAINED

PEWS



**HOW VULNERABILITY TRANSFORMS A BROKEN
CHURCH INTO A CHURCH FOR THE BROKEN**

“When I first read the title of this book, I wasn’t sure what to expect. But with each page I realized that not only is this book describing the kind of church I want to help build, it is describing the kind of person I want to be.”

KYLE IDLEMAN

Senior Pastor of Southeast Christian
and author of *Not a Fan* and *One at a Time*

“Many Christian books give the impression that the author’s life is perfect and if you read their book, yours will be too. Not this one. Carl is raw, open and challenging as he gives us practical ways to deal with our mess. Only in a community where people say “I’m bleeding too” do we experience the healing that Jesus wants us to have.”

JIM BURGEN

Lead Pastor of Flatirons Community Church
and author of *No More Dragons*

“The central story of this book about literal blood-stained pews is inspiring. The damage that fake Christians have done to the mission of Jesus is too much to count. I hope that believers everywhere take Carl’s challenge in this book to be open about our brokenness. If you do, you will create the community of grace and truth Jesus had in mind when he said, ‘I will build my church.’”

BRIAN TOME

Lead Pastor of Crossroads Church and
host of “The Aggressive Life with Brian Tome” podcast

“I lead a ministry that partners with hundreds of churches across the country. Mosaic Christian Church is one of my absolute favorites. In this book, lead pastor Carl Kuhl shares the secret recipe of what makes

Mosaic such a special church. My hope is you will read it and help your church be more of a hospital for the broken.”

DARREN KEY

CEO of Christian Financial Resources, Inc.

“If Christians were honest, we’d have to admit that long before Covid, we were wearing masks. *Blood Stained Pews* creatively and practically drives home the truth that the Church is stronger and more effective when vulnerability is seen as a value and not a weakness. We reflect Christ when we welcome the wounded and at times even shed a little of our own blood on the seats of our churches.”

DAVE STONE

Former Pastor of Southeast Christian Church

“It’s evident that Carl knows first-hand the power of loving others through the mess. *Blood Stained Pews* calls us to a courageous choice—to lay down our defenses and embrace a culture of vulnerability that allows us to be loved more deeply than ever before and meet our once-silent struggles with the healing power of Jesus. The passion, conviction, and direction embedded in these pages won’t let you turn back to the way it was.”

CHARITY BYERS

Ph.D., CEO and Psychologist, Blessing Ranch Ministries
and co-author of *Unhindered* and *Unhindered Thirty Days*

“What do you think of when you think of church? Raw? Authentic? Safe? Healing? Overflowing with grace? The odds are high that you and some of the people you love have rarely experienced any of those qualities. Carl Kuhl is on a mission to change that. He will inspire you, like he has me, through the soul refreshing words of *Blood Stained Pews*, which are modeled every day by the unique and refreshing church he leads.”

GENE APPEL

Senior Pastor of Eastside Christian Church, Anaheim, CA

“Carl Kuhl has written a disarmingly honest and hopeful book about how everything changes when we encounter God’s grace. I’ve been a friend of Carl’s and of Mosaic Church for years now, and can tell you that *Blood Stained Pews* isn’t based on theory. God is working through Carl and Mosaic to be a living example of how those of us who feel like we are too broken or too far gone, can be redeemed and used by God. If you struggle to believe this kind of grace is for you, read this book! You might just find yourself falling in love with a God who’s madly in love with you.”

CHUCK MINGO

Teaching Pastor of Crossroads Church
and CEO & Founder of Courageous Love

“Carl writes with the kind of conviction that only comes from ongoing testing and refinement. He leads by example, never asking of anyone else what he isn’t willing to do first. This book is a clear call for followers of Jesus, and the church at large, to be authentic, vulnerable, genuine. Carl makes a compelling case that doing so is the only way for us to experience abundant life and for the church to fulfill its God-given mission.”

BRENT STORMS

President/CEO of Orchard Group

“I have long believed that it’s only when we’re real that Jesus can truly help us. Vulnerability is the key to wholeness. This needed book is a call to all Christians to be brutally honest, because if we can’t bring our pain, questions, and shame to Jesus, why pretend that we need him at all? Jesus had the answers for the most broken people while he walked the earth. And the fakers just never got it, as a matter of fact, they killed him because they never got it. This book will help you take practical steps to be open about your brokenness, so the churches everywhere can have blood-stained pews.”

TIM HARLOW

Senior Pastor of Parkview Christian Church
and author of *What Made Jesus Mad?*

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To the people of Mosaic Christian Church.

You have taught me what vulnerability looks like.

We had a dream.

You made it a reality.

**WHAT WOULD IT TAKE FOR CHURCH TO BECOME KNOWN AS A
PLACE WHERE GRACE IS “ON TAP”?**

—PHILIP YANCEY

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INTRODUCTION

It's June 5, 1944. Nazi Germany has overtaken Europe. Poland has fallen. France has been overrun. Britain is hanging on to its freedom by a thread. The next twenty-four hours will determine the fate of Britain, Hitler, and the entirety of the Western world.

At approximately 9:30 p.m., the 101st Airborne, known as “the tip of the spear,” takes off from England for Normandy on the eve of the greatest invasion in history: Operation Overlord. We know it simply as D-Day.

Two American medics, Kenneth Moore and Robert Wright, are among the nearly thirteen thousand paratroopers who are dropped into France under the cover of darkness.¹ Like most paratroopers, they miss their drop zone. Like most medics, they get separated from their supplies. The only tools they have to care for the wounded are scant items they carry strapped to their bodies.

They land at 3:00 a.m. near a small French village called Angoville-au-Plain. At first, all is quiet. But very quickly Germans and Americans spot each other, and gunfire breaks out. Moore would later say, “There’s no substitute for hearing a bullet snap past your head and you realize somebody’s trying to kill you.”²

Angoville fluctuates between American and German control over the next thirty-six hours. But Moore and Wright are not there to fight the enemy—their training and purpose are to care for the wounded. As

Robert Wright sizes up the situation, he spots an old church and decides it is the perfect place to bring the wounded.

The church building itself is 900 years old.³ It is very plain—a simple structure built of stone, with a handful of wooden pews. Wright affixes a flag with a red cross on it to the front of the door so everyone will know they are there to help. Then he and Moore get to work.

Moore finds an old farm cart that he uses to comb the village-turned-battlefield. He loads injured soldiers one at a time onto the cart and wheels them to the church. There, he lays them on pews so he and Wright can assess and treat their wounds.

At various points throughout the day, Wright and Moore's work is interrupted. At one point a German soldier bursts through the church doors, pointing his machine gun at the Americans. But when he sees them treating injured soldiers, he crosses himself in reverence and departs. Later, three German officers walk in. When they see that Moore and Wright are treating everyone, regardless of what uniform they wear, the officers promise to get a doctor on site to help as soon as possible. At one point, a bomb crashes through the ceiling and cracks the stone floor where it lands. Seconds tick by—and nothing happens. The bomb is a dud. Moore grabs it and throws it out the window, just in case.

By 10:30 p.m. on D-Day the church is packed with the wounded. All the stained glass has been destroyed by bullets.

About thirty-six hours after the 101st Airborne first landed, the fighting moves on from that area, and so do the medics. By the time they leave their makeshift aid station, Moore and Wright have treated over eighty soldiers and civilians in the church, several of them German and one of them a young local girl. Both men were awarded the Silver Star for their service in Angoville. Wright received three Purple Hearts for what he did in the war.⁴

If you go to the village of Angoville today, the church is still there.

But there is something unique about it. After the war ended, the villagers were cleaning up, trying to get back to normal. When they entered the church, they saw that blood from the soldiers Moore and Wright treated covered the wooden pews.

But the people of Angoville didn't replace the soiled pews with new, shiny ones. They didn't sand them down to make them look fresh and clean. They didn't put cushions on the pews so you wouldn't see the blood. They preserved them—with the blood still on the pews.

They wanted to make absolutely clear to future generations: this church was built in the 1100s to be a place of hope and healing for broken, hurting people, and on June 6, 1944, that's exactly what it was. It was a place for the wounded to come, for the injured to bleed, for people to be healed, for the hurting to be cared for—no matter who they were, their beliefs, or their background.

They preserved the stains to remind all who would come after: this is the church of the blood-stained pews. This is the place where the hurting can come. This is the place where the wounded can heal. This is the place where the suffering are welcome.

I visited the church in Angoville not too long ago. I saw the restored stained glass windows. I viewed the memorial to Kenneth Moore and Robert Wright. I observed the crack in the stone floor where the dud bomb had landed.

And then I saw them—the blood-stained pews. I froze, overcome with emotion. Not because I am a history buff. Not because I have an affection for old churches. Not because I have a relative who was a part of D-Day.

Seeing those blood-stained pews reminded me: this is what church is supposed to be. The church—as in, the global church—should be a

place where the hurting, the broken, and the bleeding can come to get help without condemnation.

No matter the circumstance, church is the place where the outcasts and the broken can come to get help. And when people who are injured come in, they bleed. It's messy. It's gross. Sometimes it's offensive. So, while blood-stained pews are not exactly pretty—they are the necessary byproduct of a church on mission with Jesus.

The problem is, that's not true of most people's experience with church. Most people have a negative view of and negative experience with church. And when I use the word "church," please understand that I'm not talking simply about a Sunday service—I'm talking about everything that makes up the community that is the church, the body of Christ.

In his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey wrote about a friend of his who was a social worker. The friend counseled a prostitute who was seeking help to escape her lifestyle. The woman initially sold her body to support her drug habit. Then she got into more expensive drugs, which led to her renting out her two-year-old daughter to men interested in weird sex. She was distraught, asking what to do. Finally, Yancey's friend asked, "Did you ever think of going to church for help?" She stopped short and said, "Church? Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse." Through this shocking and heartbreaking story, Yancey points out that the very people who run *away* from the church today are those who ran *to* Jesus in the Scriptures.⁵

There are too many churches with clean pews, metaphorically speaking. And it's not that people aren't injured and bleeding; it's that we have taught them: "Don't show that wound. Cover it up so you don't bleed on others. Deal with it on your own. Pretend everything's okay." So, people stay away. And if they do come, they hide their wounds.

Although some will disagree, I believe what the church has missed in

recent years is not the substance of its beliefs. I know there are exceptions, but for the most part the church as a whole does a good job standing on God's Word as truth. What the church continues to miss is the environment they build around those beliefs. A church of blood-stained pews needs to create a culture of vulnerability. In other words, this kind of church must be a people open about our brokenness, doubt, pain, anger, dreams, fears, and desires. We must acknowledge, "I'm bleeding."

I studied the history of Christianity in college. Much of it is lost on me now, but I do remember the Restoration Movement. What struck me is that its mission is not simply to reform what was already broken but to restore what was originally intended. I like that. I believe the new restoration movement will not be about theory, church authority, or sacraments. It will be about practice, grace, and community. When I first heard the story of the blood-stained pews, I thought, *This is the best image of church I've ever seen*. Isn't church supposed to be the place where the broken can bleed? Isn't it supposed to be the place where the wounded can come? Isn't the church supposed to be a hospital for the hurting? Isn't the church designed for the sinner? Didn't Jesus say, "Healthy people don't need a doctor—sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners" (Mark 2:17)?

Jesus was constantly reaching out to the outcasts, the broken, the rejected, the embezzlers, the sinners, the sex workers, the possessed, the injured, and the bleeding. His mission looked radically different than the priorities of the religious leaders in his day. I love Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28–30 (MSG):

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and

work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

This is who Jesus came for: the openly broken.

The reality is, bleeding people sit in the seats next to us, whether we admit it or not. If the church reaches average people, then in any given church in America:

- 1 in 4 people abuse alcohol regularly.⁶
- 1 in 4 women have had an abortion.⁷
- 1 in 20 are contemplating suicide.⁸
- 1 in 6 are actively battling anxiety disorders.⁹
- 1 in 5 men and 1 in 8 women have had or are actively having affairs.¹⁰

And think about this: Jesus appeals to the most broken of the broken. If hitting rock bottom is what makes people realize they need Jesus, those stats are probably *higher* in the church than anywhere else. So, why does it seem the church is not a safe place to bleed?

The church was not started to prevent pain and bloodshed. It was started to seek out those who are bleeding, bring them into the church with all their mess, and do whatever it takes to help them experience life—like Moore and Wright did on that fateful day.

We could focus all day on how the idea of church has been polluted, but we need to trace the path to its pure source and figure out together what Jesus intended the church to be. How did he interact with broken people like us? How does Jesus intend his followers to act? What does that look like in community? My ultimate goal is for you to choose

vulnerability and experience the freedom that comes from the gospel colliding with your brokenness. My hope is that out of a choice to be radically vulnerable, *you* will be the change—*you* will be the impetus to create a community of openly broken people.

Recently, I felt compelled to write Yancey a letter inspired by the story I read about the social worker and the prostitute.

Dear Mr. Yancey,

Nearly twenty years ago your book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* rocked my world. I had grown up in a great church, I had accepted that grace, and I had been living in that grace. But your book took it to a depth I felt but had never heard articulated.

When I read the story of the drug-addicted mom who rented out her daughter for sex but refused to go to church for help, I had two immediate thoughts: First, I thought, if she had come to the church I grew up at, she would've found grace. But that was closely followed by this thought: not enough places have churches like that.

I was in college at the time, and I knew I had to get this message out. That ultimately led to our family moving to Maryland in 2008 to launch a new church. We knew no one in the state, so to say it was daunting is an understatement.

You wrote another book a couple years ago, *Vanishing Grace*, in which you lamented the lack of grace you have seen and how the church has not grown in its grace since your original book on grace released.

I beg to differ, and my evidence is the people who make up my church:

- A friend of mine recently shared that in the last two years, he hasn't gone four straight days without either looking at porn or having sex with someone. Many churches would kick him out. He serves on our cleaning team and attends every week.
- I have a gay friend who wakes up every day asking the same question: "God, am I an abomination?" Sometimes he thinks, "Yes, I am," and pursues hookups with other men. We have lunch every so often to talk about grace and God's ultimate truth about him.
- I pastor a woman who came to church, got baptized, got clean, and was making wise decisions. But when her man got out of prison, she got pregnant again and was making poor choices. I reached out to her and could hear the shame in her voice when she said she couldn't come to church these days. I told her, "No, this is where you *need* to be." Now, she's back and trying to figure things out.

- I have a friend who's watching his wife die of cancer. And he's been *so* faithful to Jesus. But now his question is, "Carl, how does God's grace get me through this?"
- A friend of mine is trying to move on from being a prostitute. She attends every week, compliments my sermons, and is trying to figure out if Jesus can keep her clean and away from dangerous men.

I love these people. They are screw-ups, they're outcasts, and they're broken. They keep messing up: they're just like me. Sometimes it seems we take two steps forward and three steps back.

But at the end of the day, we come together because we know we have grace. We don't really use the term "grace"—we call it "endless second chances," because we never outgrow our need for it. Grace is so hard, because how much you appreciate it is in direct proportion to how much you realize you are screwed up.

There are things I wish our church did better, but one thing I know we get right is grace: no matter who you are, where you've come from, how old you are, what religious background you have, how many people you've slept with, what race you are, how many people you've taken advantage of—our community is a place where grace is kept on tap, and the bar is always open.

Don't give up. There is hope for the church.

— Carl Kuhl

For those of you who feel cynical about the church, I get it. But the message I sent in that letter is what I want you to hear as well: don't give up. There is hope. Remember, Jesus said he came not for the healthy, but for the sick. In other words, he came to find those who'd been mortally wounded, and then he started his church as a place to bring them and heal them.

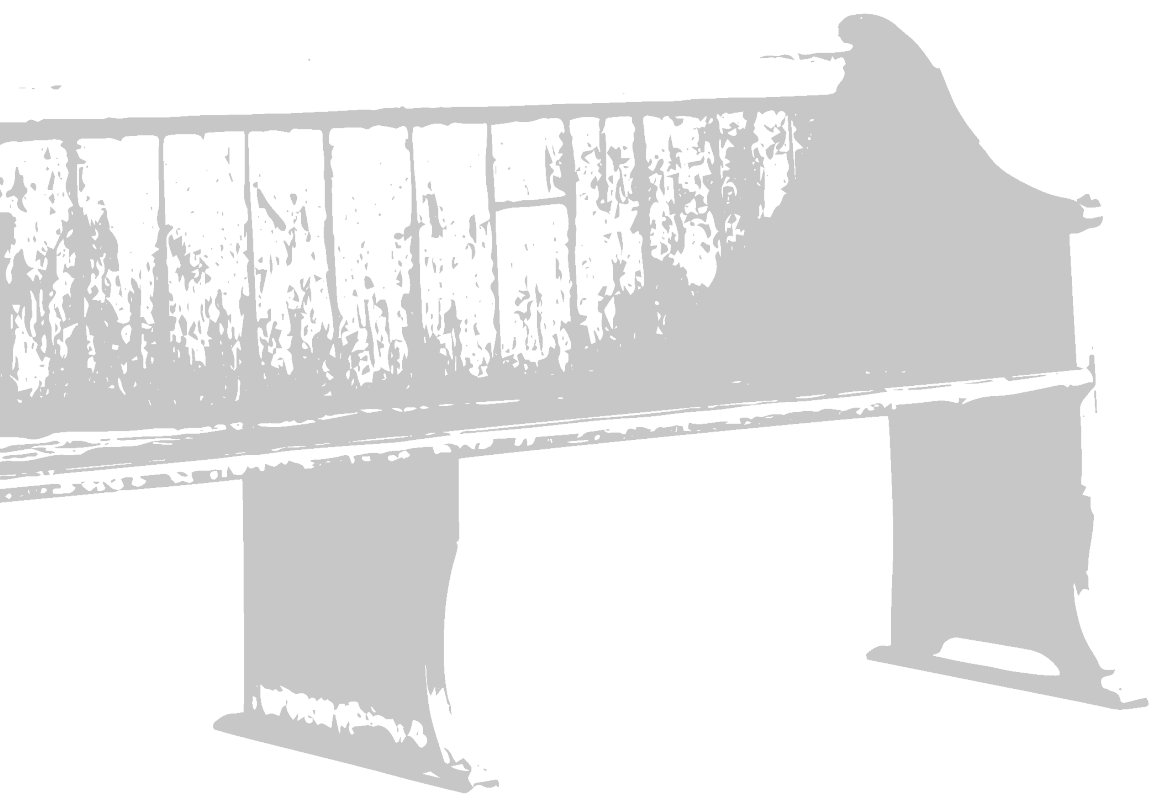
Whether you are someone who loves Jesus, but not the church, or a pastor looking to transform your church; whether you are bleeding because of your own mistakes or because of someone else's; whether you are hanging on for dear life or ready to run after those who are dying—this book is for you. This book is for you if you think Jesus is safe but his followers are not. This book is for you if the Christian community you've experienced falls short, but you know there has to be something better. This book is for you if you want to join me on the journey of rediscovering what Jesus had in mind when he started the church. It is my prayer that this journey will result in a rededication to the mission Jesus gave us. Through posturing our hearts toward vulnerability, practicing vulnerability in our communities, and realizing the power of vulnerability beyond our church doors, I believe we will look more like the church Jesus intended and experience the freedom that type of community brings.

Not long after I sent that letter to Philip Yancey, I was surprised to receive a note in return. He expressed appreciation for the kind words, and then added, "I'm sure you know that what you describe is not the norm in the average church. But it gives me hope that the gospel is still transforming lives, step by step, and God's love is being felt by us ragamuffins."

That phrase stuck with me: “What you describe is not the norm in the average church.” I keep Yancey’s reply framed at my desk, forcing myself to stare at that sentence as I write. That phrase is the reason for this book. People need a place where they can bleed. People need a place where they can be broken. People need a community of endless second chances. And it’s not just “people” in a generic sense—I need it, and so do you.

PART 1

LOOK INWARD



CHAPTER 1

LOOK IN THE MIRROR

IF THE BIGGEST SINNER YOU KNOW ISN'T YOU, THEN YOU DON'T KNOW YOURSELF VERY WELL.

—JEAN LARROUX

During World War II, Andras Tamas is drafted into the army in his native Hungary and captured by the enemy. But when he's processed, they mistake his native Hungarian language for the gibberish of a lunatic. So, they have him committed to a Russian psychiatric hospital. Then they forget about him—for 53 years.

However, around the year 2000, a psychiatrist at the hospital realizes Tamas is not, in fact, a lunatic and helps him begin to recover the memories of who he is and where he came from. Tamas is then released and returns home to Budapest as a war hero, dubbed “the last prisoner of World War II.”

The most peculiar part of his story is that not only has he forgotten his real name, but he also hasn't seen his own face in five decades. A news account shared that when they gave him a mirror, he studied his face as

though looking at it for the first time: “For hours, the old man studies the face in a mirror. The deep-set eyes. The gray stubble on the chin. The furrows of the brow. It is his face, but to him it is a startling revelation.”¹¹

I believe we need to follow Tamas’s example and take a long look in the mirror.

Our souls desire to live in a community of open brokenness—a community of blood-stained pews—where the broken and hurting are genuinely cared for, accepted, cherished, and valued no matter what. But it requires something of us. It sounds nice to say we want a community where people are vulnerable, where hypocrisy is renounced, where we can be fully known and fully loved by God and each other. It sounds great until we realize that to experience this, we have to participate.

Vulnerability is terrifying. Admitting brokenness, weaknesses, temptations, hopes, dreams, and failures is difficult and scary. We naturally avoid being vulnerable with others in most situations, and we avoid being honest with ourselves about our own brokenness. But the first step of living in a community with blood-stained pews is being honest with ourselves—honest about how we are broken, honest that we are bleeding, honest that we need help. Because if we aren’t honest, how can we expect anyone else to be?

To look inward as we pursue vulnerability, we need to acknowledge that grace is a journey, we’ll never “arrive,” and nothing we can do on our own can fix our brokenness. There are typically four human responses toward encountering our own brokenness:

- Pride: we justify our brokenness
- Shame: we take on the identity of our brokenness
- Apathy: we blame circumstances or others for our brokenness
- Doubt: we don’t believe God can heal our brokenness

In all these scenarios, we center ourselves and our identity on our brokenness or lack thereof rather than centering our lives on God and our identity on who he created us to be. So, the first way we change the narrative of our brokenness is this: we've got to look in the mirror.

When I think of the idea of church being a safe place for broken people to experience healing, I immediately think about the ways we convince ourselves we are the exception. I think about how everyone, in one area of their life or another, has a case of the wells. When we make excuses, it's often preceded by the word "well." For example: My wife will ask if I picked up the item she needs at the grocery and I respond, "Well, I had a stressful day, so I forgot." I ask a friend why he didn't meet me at the gym, and he says, "Well, my alarm didn't go off." I ask my kid why he was rude to his brother, and he tells me, "Well, he did it first."

It's one thing to do that for a grocery list or being late to the gym, but we do this for much more serious things as well.

- We say people shouldn't look at porn, but when we look, we think, *Well, you don't know how bad the sex is in my marriage and how stressed I am.*
- We think people should be generous, but when we leave a small tip, we rationalize, "Well, that was terrible service!"
- We think others should take a day off every week, but when we check our email on Saturday, we think, *Well, God knows my heart; it's not like I'm a workaholic.*
- We want other people to be open, but when we think of being vulnerable, we make the excuse "Well, my thing is so petty; they wouldn't understand."

We are quick to judge and condemn others while letting ourselves off the hook. Psychologists call this the Fundamental Attribution Error.¹² It works like this: when something goes well in my life, I take credit for it, believing I caused it. But if something goes wrong, I blame it on outside circumstances. For example, if I lose weight, it's because I'm disciplined; if I gain weight, it's because of my genetics. If I make money in the stock market, it's because I'm so wise; if I lose money, it's because I was unlucky.

What makes the Fundamental Attribution Error even worse is the way we explain the behavior of other people. If something goes wrong, it's their fault. For example, if other people gain weight, it's because they're undisciplined, and if they lose money, it's because they're foolish. That's the Fundamental Attribution Error at work.

We are masters at the art of self-deception. And, as we know, the first step of living in a community of blood-stained pews is being honest with ourselves. But being honest with ourselves requires vulnerability. Unfortunately, the first barrier to this type of community is a friend we know all too well: his name is Pride.

It's easy to spot pride in the athlete who gets a taunting penalty. It's easy to call it out in the performer whose lyrics are self-centered. It's obvious in the politician who talks like he will single-handedly solve the world's problems. It's a little more difficult to recognize pride in our own lives.

This makes me think of a story Jesus told. Two men go to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee: one of the religious leaders who's great at keeping the rules. The other is a tax collector: essentially a sell-out to the Roman Empire who makes more money if he rips off his fellow Jews. But here's what happens:

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: "I thank you, God, that I am not like other

people—cheaters, sinners, adulterers. I'm certainly not like that tax collector! I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income."

But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner."

And in case we miss what's going on, Jesus makes it clear: "I tell you, this sinner, not the Pharisee, returned home justified before God. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:10–14).

When we read about the Pharisees, we often make the mistake of hearing anything they say with a snooty, arrogant tone that's more fitting of a bad boss on a lame sitcom than any Pharisee in Jesus' day. Pharisees were experts in religious law; they were respected and feared in their communities. When I think about his prayer, I have to ask myself how many times I have prayed things like, "God, thanks that I didn't look at porn last week. God, thanks that I give way more than a tithe. God, thanks that I don't cheat people." And what do we do in the church with someone who prays this prayer? We make him an elder!

But the tax collector knows he is the worst of sinners. Remember, in Jesus' day, tax collectors are the despised sell-outs who work for their foreign occupiers. This tax collector is aware of his brokenness: he won't even look to heaven (the typical prayer posture of the day), hits himself on the chest (that's weird), and begs for mercy (that's uncommon).

The Pharisee talks about what he did and didn't do; the tax collector focuses on the selfish condition of his heart. And Jesus makes very clear: one of these guys—and *only* one of these guys—is good with

God because one of these guys—and *only* one of these guys—knows he hasn't arrived.

Have you ever been on one of those family road trips with a young kid who constantly asked, “Are we there yet?” Parents often joke that there's a difference between a trip and a vacation. One involves young children, and one involves happiness. While there is nothing wrong with a family trip—and, in fact, it can be a memorable time of family bonding—it should never, ever be confused with a vacation.

A friend once sent me the following list, humorously denoting the differences between a trip and a vacation:

- If you are traveling by car, there is a good chance it's a trip. If you have packed one or more “throw-up bags,” clearly, it's a trip. If you packed a training potty, it's not a vacation. If packing the car leads to a fight with your spouse about who has a better “system,” you, my friend, are going on a trip.
- If you can't see out the back window the entire time you are driving, it's a trip. If the children have fought about where they are sitting, it's definitely a trip. If the car has a constant smell of fast food, you are on a trip.
- If you've broken out the “all we could afford to do growing up was go camping” lecture, you are officially on a trip. If no one heard you because they all have their headphones in, it's most certainly a trip.
- If you are meeting extended family and/or in-laws—please don't insult me—it's a trip.

*If you *were* this kid, text your parents and siblings to apologize. Now. Seriously, you were really annoying.

- If there is a pack-and-play in your room, you are on a trip.
- If you are in a hotel room with two double beds: trippity trip trip. If your kids go to bed at 8:00 p.m. and you have to be quiet and locked in the room with them, that's a classic trip, my friend.
- If your destination is a tent, you are so not on a vacation. I don't even know what to tell you. You are not *even* on a trip. You are on a *camping* trip.

I love trips and I love vacations. But what this book is about is going on a journey. A journey is something entirely different from a trip. A journey is a quest. A journey may involve a battle. A journey often involves good versus evil. On a vacation I go somewhere different. On a journey I *become* someone different. On a trip my location changes; on a journey my *soul* changes.

In Jesus' story, the tax collector realized following God is a journey, that he would never arrive—whatever that would mean—and that every day of his life he would be completely in need of God's grace. But the Pharisee thought spiritual growth was a trip, and he'd arrived at the destination. Because of this, he was full of pride. The Pharisee was comparing himself to other people. That will result in pride every time and keep us from dealing with the things behind the actions that need to be dealt with.

I'm part of a spiritual formation group. This group is made up of seven men who get together most Mondays to do some soul work. One week involved exposing the lies we tell ourselves. The leader paired us up. We looked at the man across from us, with whom we'd already been in this group for many months. And the leader told us to think of a negative judgment of that man, something like, "You're a bad dad," "You're a passive husband," or "You're a lazy employee." Then, while maintaining

eye contact with the other man, we had to say this judgment aloud. (Talk about uncomfortable!)

Then the facilitator asked, “What kind of man is a . . .? Fill in the blank.” What kind of man is a bad dad? What kind of man is a lazy employee? We had to look the man in the eye and say the answer to that question: “You are a man who cares only about himself. You are a man who hasn’t dealt with your issues.”

So, we were completely uncomfortable in this exercise, wondering what in the world we were doing. And what the leader did next surprised me. He took out a mirror, had the man across from me hold it so I could see myself, then directed, “Say it again.” I looked in the mirror and said the same things. In that moment, the lesson hit me like a ton of bricks: I go through life making up stories about other people based on limited data. But the reality is, the majority of the time those stories are a way for me to deflect attention from my own issues. Through those stories, I’m trying to say, “I’m not bleeding. You are!”

The truth is, I don’t want the attention on me. I want to be the exception. And maybe I’m not actually those things—maybe I’m not lazy or selfish. But that’s what I fear becoming in the moments when I cast condemnation on others. In other words, when I cast judgments on others, it’s a clue that I’m not being real with myself about something.

See, the Pharisee in Jesus’ story was consumed with the guy praying next to him, when he needed to look in the mirror and take stock of his own stuff. Sure, he didn’t have the same sins as someone else, but there was some other stuff he didn’t dig into because he was too busy comparing.

Dealing with our pride is vital to this idea of blood-stained pews, the idea of living freely and lightly, the idea of living with open brokenness.

The apostle Paul understood this well. He wrote thirteen books of the New Testament, started many churches, and carried the title of

“apostle”—he was kind of a big deal. In a letter to Timothy, though, he calls himself the worst of sinners. What’s interesting is his exact language. He doesn’t say, “I *was* the worst of sinners.” He says, “I *am* the worst” (1 Timothy 1:15).

“Am,” as in present tense, not something he used to be. The “worst of sinners” is something he continues to be, even as he builds churches and spreads the gospel. Maybe he continues to screw up royally. Maybe as you get closer to God in your relationship with him, the darkness and depth of your sin are more noticeable. Either way, he says, “I *am* the worst.”

If vulnerability leads to freedom and the first barrier to vulnerability is my pride, how do I *not* be like the Pharisee? How do I become like Paul instead? The answer is simply to reject a common line of thinking that exists today: “I need to forgive myself.”

There is a lot of talk these days about self-forgiveness; it’s huge in the secular world. This lie has even found its way into Christian thinking because it *sounds* right. It *sounds* like it’s spiritual and grace filled. But the idea that you need to, or even can, forgive yourself is a lie from the pit of hell.

Let me explain. You will hear Christians say, “I just can’t forgive myself” or, “I know God has forgiven me, but I’m struggling to forgive myself.” This is the wrong mindset because forgiveness always has a cost.

Let’s say that you have a cabin in the Rocky Mountains, and you say, “Carl, I know you like to ski, so why don’t you use my place for free?”* So, I stay at your place and have a great time. But as I’m leaving, I back into your mailbox, run it over, and destroy it. One of two things can happen: You can decide *not* to forgive me, in which case I’m buying you a new mailbox. Or you can forgive me, but then *you* have to buy a new mailbox. Either way, *someone* is buying a new mailbox. Someone is paying the cost.

*Just speaking hypothetically, but you can reach me via social media. I promise to clean up after my stay.

Forgiveness *always* has a cost. Sometimes people ask, “Why did Jesus have to die on the cross?” This is why! Because *someone* had to pay for our sin. We can or he can, and he chose to do it.

Think about this with relationships. If someone wounds you deeply, to *not* forgive them means they pay the cost, meaning they no longer have a relationship with you. On the other hand, if you forgive them, you pay the cost of having to show them grace, overlook the offense, and choose to have a relationship even though it’s difficult. Someone always carries the cost of forgiveness.

Let’s say I’ve messed up. If God forgives me, he says he will take my sin. But what would it look like to forgive myself? If I’m trying to forgive myself, I’m trying to transfer the cost of this from myself to myself. So, I’m still stuck with it! But if God forgives me, I put it on him, and he pays the cost. He’s taken it away; I don’t have to forgive myself because the burden is gone. The beauty of the cross is that you don’t have to forgive yourself, because that’s what Jesus did when he died for you: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV).

When you hear people say, or even catch yourself saying, “I just want to forgive myself, but I can’t”—that’s correct! You *can’t* forgive yourself! Grace means it’s impossible to forgive myself. Satan wants you to believe you need to do something in addition to what Jesus has done for you. Scripture says Satan schemes. One way he schemes is this lie he’s planted in our world that says, “I need to forgive myself.” No, you don’t. You can’t! You just need to come to grips with the fact that Jesus has forgiven you, set you free, and made you new. He has forgiven even that thing you want to carry guilt for.

Here’s why this matters: If I have to forgive myself, that’s pretty daunting. I think I’ll just change my perspective; I’ll get a case of the wells so I’m not really that bad of a sinner. I’ll lie to myself about it, and

I won't have much to forgive. But if Jesus forgives me, if it is impossible for me to forgive myself, if endless second chances are real and Jesus is the only one who offers them—then I can be honest with myself about who I am, what I do, and the things I desire.

We cannot save ourselves. We cannot achieve right standing with God. We cannot excuse our own brokenness. And we cannot forgive ourselves. Only Jesus can do those things. Like Paul and the tax collector, we must recognize we are the worst of sinners. We are on a journey of grace, we haven't arrived, and we won't arrive in this life. But through the gift of vulnerability, we get to humbly journey with others who are in the same boat.

Jesus says, "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12). Being openly broken means not trying to minimize your brokenness but seeing it for what it is. It means humbly acknowledging that you cannot achieve righteousness on your own. You cannot justify yourself. You cannot forgive yourself. You need the grace and forgiveness Jesus offers.

It's hard to set aside our pride and take an honest look in the mirror. But when we do, we don't just see the darkness in our souls and the sin in our desires. We see the grace of Jesus, which means we've overcome the first barrier to being vulnerable, and we're ready to continue the journey.

