

How Jesus
Saves the World
from Us

*12 Antidotes to
Toxic Christianity*

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Introduction

Have Christians become what Jesus came to stop us from being?

It's a question that haunts me as an American evangelical Christian who lives in a time when our culture wars have alienated so many good people from ever giving Jesus a chance. Why do the loudest Christian voices today sound so much like the religious authorities who crucified Jesus? Did Jesus really win after he was raised from the dead? Or was his movement co-opted over the centuries by the spiritual heirs of the very people who had him killed?

Some people blame Constantine, the first Roman emperor to convert to Christianity, for turning an outsider movement into an imperial conquest. Other people point the finger at Augustine, the brilliant fourth-century theologian whose misgivings about his sex life may have helped to shape the unhealthy relationship we Christians have with our bodies.¹ Others say it was the medieval nominalists, who taught that words mean only whatever God says they mean, which means that God could hate and call it love.

Of course, there has always been a beautiful Christianity sharing the same church with the loudmouths who get all the headlines. There were the Egyptian desert mystics, who, whenever they got robbed, would chase after the thieves to tell them they forgot something. There was Francis of Assisi, who never met a

leper whom he didn't kiss. There was Julian of Norwich, the first Christian woman to write a book in English, who claimed that her visions revealed a God who was purely benevolent and mostly motherly, without an ounce of hate, despite the bubonic plague that was devastating her people.

Still, it seems as if the loud, mean Christians are the ones who always win. But perhaps this makes sense in a strange way. If Jesus' cross is the heart of Christianity, then maybe Jesus has never stopped being crucified by his own people, and the ones who really get Jesus are crucified along with him. John 1:11 says, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." How do we know this is talking only about Jesus' original life on earth? What if Jesus keeps coming back to "his own" and we keep on rejecting him?

When Jesus was on the cross, he said something that applies to Christians who crucify him today as much as it did to the religious leaders who first crucified him. He said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Jesus knew that the religious leaders who crucified him thought they were doing so out of genuine allegiance to God. They thought he was ruining everything about their religious system—and indeed he was. They didn't realize that he was actually God incarnate, come down to fix what they had screwed up.

The religious authorities had good reason to think that they were supposed to put Jesus to death. In the ancient Bible stories they had read, God commended those who killed out of zeal for his holiness. When the Israelites built a golden calf to worship instead of God, their leader, Moses, told the sons of Levi, "Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor" (Exod. 32:27b). When the sons of Levi obeyed Moses and slaughtered three thousand random people, Moses told them, "Today you have ordained yourselves for the service of the LORD" (Exod. 32:29). Thus, the Levites, one of the most important Israelite religious orders, was established by an act of terrorism almost as massive as 9/11.

Likewise, when the Israelite men started sleeping with Moabite

women and worshipping their gods, Moses' great-nephew Phinehas saw an Israelite take a Moabite woman into a tent. He followed them, took a spear, and thrust it through both of them while they were making love. As a reward for this double murder, Phinehas and his descendants were given "a covenant of perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the Israelites" (Num. 25:13).

If holy priesthoods are rewarded to those who kill for God's honor, then crucifying a man who claimed to be God is the ultimate expression of righteous zeal. Likewise, it was perfectly righteous for a religious zealot named Saul of Tarsus to persecute the followers of this Jesus. In Acts 7, Saul oversees the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. Then he goes on a tear, dragging Christians from their homes and throwing them in prison (Acts 8:1–3). Saul was every bit as passionate about standing up for God as many Christians are today. But one day, on his way to persecute Christians in Damascus, Saul was blinded by a light and fell to the ground. A voice came out of the bright light saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul said, "Who are you, Lord?" And the voice replied, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4–5).

As a result of this dramatic encounter, Saul stopped persecuting Christians and became the *apostle* Paul, the greatest Christian missionary of all time. Christians often see Paul's Damascus Road encounter as a biblical paradigm for how salvation happens. But Jesus didn't save Saul from anything so much as he saved the world *from Saul*. I wonder if this recognition would be helpful to how Christians understand salvation today. *How would Christians live differently if we believed that Jesus needs to save the world from us?*

I really do mean *us*. All of us. Not just the Christians I define myself against, but Christians who posture exactly the same way I do. I really believe that being authentically Christian amounts to believing that the world needs to be saved *from me*, instead of thinking I have to save the world *from them* (whoever "them" is). British writer G. K. Chesterton gave a famous two-word response when a newspaper asked its readers to share what they thought was wrong with the world. "I am," he wrote back.²

This is a book for Christians who are troubled by what we've become and want Jesus to save the world from us. It's also a book for anyone else who wants to eavesdrop and see whether Jesus might have something better to say than what you've heard from Christians before.

I've identified twelve toxic Christian attitudes from which Jesus needs to save us and twelve antidotes that Jesus uses to save us. He's saving the world from our disingenuous posturing, our exhibitionist martyrdom, our isolationism, our disembodiment, our moral cowardice, our ideological certitude, our divisiveness, our anxious overprogramming, our moralistic meritocracy, our prejudice, our pursuit of celebrity, and our quest for uniformity. He's saving us by filling our hearts with genuine worship, wounding us with his mercy, emptying our spiritual clutter, breathing vitality into our bodies, awakening our sense of honor, captivating us with his poetry, letting us taste true glory, showing us the beauty of his temple, sticking up for people who screw up, liberating us from social conventions, modeling his way of servanthood, and calling us deeper into his kingdom.

My social location as a middle-class, straight, white male limits my radar screen. Though I've tried to write this for everyone, at times I will inevitably be addressing my own demographic—from whom the world might need the most saving. This book documents a journey I've traveled many years in search of a more beautiful gospel than the one I grew up thinking we had to believe. My prayer is that you can be inspired by the hope that I've been shown by incredible mentors and angels along the way.

Jesus once healed a man with a legion of demons by casting the demons into a herd of pigs who stampeded into a lake and drowned (Mark 5:1–20). Recently I realized that this is what Jesus is doing to our church today. The more that mean, loud Christians behave like stampeding pigs, the more our demons are exorcised as everyone's eyes are opened.

The discomfort that you feel at what you've seen around you is the Holy Spirit awakening the church. We have so many problems in our day: police brutality against black people, a generation of severely indebted college graduates, the greatest wealth

inequity our society has known in generations, unjust trade and immigration laws, a climate that has been heavily damaged by our waste. I feel pretty helpless in the face of these serious problems, but I do have one piece of good news: *Jesus is saving the world from us, one Christian at a time.*

Chapter One

Worship, Not Performance: How We Love God

And whenever you pray, do not be like the [performers]; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. (Matt. 6:5, my translation)

My sons used to break-dance during church. Except that it wasn't exactly break dancing. While the praise band played, they would experiment with spinning in the aisle, often falling over in the process. They did headstands and half-cartwheels. At other times they moved like robots. They weren't the only kids who danced in the aisle at our contemporary worship service. Sometimes half a dozen children would be running around, crashing into each other, falling, rolling on the floor. At first, I thought that their aisle dancing was key to our marketing of the ultimate "kid-friendly" worship service. But I never could get a good picture. Because what they were doing wasn't photogenic. It was too chaotic. Too unchoreographed.

And that's what made it beautiful. It was uninhibited *worship*. Those kids felt safe moving their bodies to the music in the socially disruptive, un-stage-managed way that kids do everything. Even if they ran more than they danced, even if they weren't singing the words on the screen correctly, they were delighting in God's presence. Psalm 37:4 says, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart." *That is worship*. That's what human existence is supposed to be. God is the DJ of the dance party that is our world. Like every good DJ, God's goal is to make us dance with abandon and wonder. Without an agenda. Without worrying what other people think.

Contemporary worship pastors often wring our hands over whether we are genuinely worshipping God or putting on a performance. When the lead guitarist gets carried away in a solo, is it showing off for others or savoring God's glory? When worshipers throw their hands up in the air and close their eyes emphatically, are they really on fire for God, or do they want everyone else to think they're on fire? As cynical as I am, it's hard not to presume that anybody who seems way more "into it" than I am must be putting on an act. Because if they aren't putting on an act, if they're genuinely responding to a powerful connection with God that I don't have, then what's wrong with me?

But seeing those kids dancing in the aisle completely disarmed my cynicism. Their enthusiasm for worship didn't judge me; it inspired me. Sometimes during the last song, they would grab my hands so we could spin around in circles together until somebody fell over. Or they would start jumping up and down, and it would give me the courage to jump with them. They took me back to my early childhood, to a time when I wasn't afraid to let myself go in the presence of God. I remembered Jesus' declaration in Mark 10:15 that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

True Innocence

In what sense do we need to become like children to receive the kingdom of God? There are many ways that as adults we should not act like children. Children tend to be very selfish. They think they are the center of the universe, until they learn otherwise. They're often rude because they don't understand the social conventions that require years of patient teaching for them to learn. They have short attention spans. They have trouble sitting still enough to enjoy the scenery. They always have to be climbing, chewing, scratching, or touching everything.

But there's something children have that I would give anything to get back: the wonder and delight of a life *without self-consciousness*. Children may be selfish; they may scream, "MINE!" when asked to share a toy; but they have not started obsessing

about what other people think of them. That is what we mean when we talk about the innocence of children. It doesn't mean they have never been guilty; they just aren't *guilt-ridden*. They make mistakes, but they aren't paralyzed with worry about making mistakes.

Until children lose their innocence, they live in a world without mirrors. And a world without mirrors is a world full of God's glory. Every new discovery is the best thing ever, whether it's the escalator at the mall or a bridge that goes all the way over the Mississippi River. Children are genuinely wowed by the features of God's creation that grown-ups have stopped noticing because we're so preoccupied with our careers and agendas and platforms. Even if children don't have a fully developed concept of God, they live in *worship* because they haven't learned that they're supposed to be *performing* some role that society or peers or their own self-consciousness tells them they should be playing.

As we get older, we lose the delight and wonder of childhood. Sometimes there's a single scarring incident; sometimes it happens over time. Some children experience the tragedy of having their innocence taken away by abusive adults. Others gain self-consciousness in competitive sports when they drop the ball too often or lose too many races. Others learn that they're supposed to worry about being "fat" or "ugly." However it happens, we all lose our innocence. We are all transformed from curious, delightful worshipers into anxious, self-obsessed performers.

This loss of innocence so endemic to the human experience is captured in the biblical story of Adam and Eve's fall into sin. This story explains the tragic heart of the human condition. The self-consciousness that sets us apart from other animals proves to be a strange curse that forms the basis for our sin and conflict with one another. It is this self-obsession that we need to be saved from.

Adam and Eve's story revolves around a fruit that they are told by God not to eat, a fruit that provides the knowledge of good and evil. A serpent tricks them into eating this fruit, and they are cursed as a result. The key to understanding the story is to look

at the connection between what God tells Adam and Eve will happen when they eat the fruit and what actually happens.

In Genesis 2:16–17, God tells Adam: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat of it you shall die.” When the serpent tempts Adam’s wife Eve with the fruit in Genesis 3:4–5, he says: “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So who is telling the truth?

Genesis 3:7 describes the moment after Adam and Eve take a bite: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” This verse is the key to the whole story, but it’s often completely glossed over by biblical interpreters.

When we read further to Genesis 3:22, God says, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever.” Notice that God repeats almost verbatim the words that the serpent had attributed to his motives. He seems to be jealously guarding his divinity and immortality from Adam and Eve. To keep them from eating fruit of this tree of life, he kicks them out of the garden where they live.

So who was telling the truth? God or the serpent? Was God trying to protect Adam and Eve from a kind of “death,” or was God worried about them becoming “like God” and gaining the wisdom and immortality he was selfishly guarding for himself? Let’s review. God told Adam that he would die on the day he ate the fruit. That didn’t happen. The serpent told Eve that their eyes “would be opened,” which seems to be what really happened. The serpent said furthermore that God forbade them from eating the fruit solely because he didn’t want them to become “like God,” a suspicion that God seems to confirm in Genesis 3:22.

The Hebrew writers of the Old Testament love irony, and this is a beautiful example. The serpent technically told the truth on every point, but his truth was entirely deceitful. We miss this critical irony if we conclude that what God meant was that Adam and

Eve would become mortal from eating the fruit, because that's not what God said. God said they would die on the day they ate it. The fact is that Adam and Eve *really do die* the moment their eyes are opened to their nakedness. It's just that this death is the death *of their innocence* rather than the physical death that the serpent truthfully said would not happen. Their death is their discovery of their nakedness, a word that had no meaning to them before their eyes were "opened."

Genesis 2:25 tells us that before they ate the fruit, "the man and his wife were both *naked*, and were not ashamed." After they eat the fruit and have their eyes opened, they hide from God in the bushes. Adam explains to God, "I was afraid, because I was *naked*," and God responds, "Who told you that you were *naked*?" (Gen. 3:10–11, my emphasis). So many Christians make the story of Adam and Eve entirely about disobedience and punishment, but the story says that it's about the way that human beings discover the self-consciousness and fear of their nakedness. God tells Adam and Eve not to do something, giving them a simplified explanation of consequences they couldn't understand ("You will die"). When Adam and Eve do it anyway, God reveals these consequences in full.

Adam and Eve don't gain the wisdom that the serpent promised as a result of eating the fruit; the only "knowledge" that they gain is the fear and shame of their nakedness. They receive the curse of *self-consciousness*, the death of innocent wonder, which turns a life of worship into a life of performance. All of the curses God pronounces against Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 can be interpreted as the natural consequences of self-consciousness.

A World Cursed by Performance

For hunter-gatherers running through the woods, the whole world is *God's garden*, where you eat when you eat and you starve when you starve. When you gain self-consciousness, you start to panic about your food supply, so you ditch hunter-gathering for agriculture. You hack away at God's untamed garden and start building *your own plantation*, where you can grow your own food, which you will need to fight wars to protect from other

hungry people. This seems a reasonable way to interpret what God means when he tells Adam, “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen. 3:17). The same “eye opening” that makes Adam afraid of his nakedness turns his world from a garden of abundance to a plantation of scarcity.

God’s curse against Eve can also be interpreted in terms of her self-consciousness. God says, “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16). Without self-consciousness, female animals experience the physical pain of childbirth as a temporary agony. With self-consciousness comes memory, not only for individual mothers but the collective memory that they pass down to their daughters through the generations, so that they are all anticipating the pain of childbirth before it happens, which of course “increases its pangs.”

Likewise, with self-consciousness comes a woman’s awareness of her vulnerability when she is nursing her infants. The man gains the power in the relationship, because a man can sow his seed and run off to the next woman, while the woman needs the man to protect her and her child, at least until the child is weaned. So the woman’s “desire” and nervousness about getting ditched are the basis for the man’s “rule” over her, which shows how so-called traditional gender roles are derived in this curse.

Unlike the first humans, represented by Adam and Eve, we are born into a species whose innocence was lost long before our time. We don’t have a chance. We will inevitably lose the innocent wonder of our childhood and spend most of our lives hiding behind the masks of social performance. In late childhood and adolescence, it’s referred to as the need to “be cool.” In adulthood, it’s sometimes called “keeping up with the Joneses.” This problem has been intensified in the age of social media, in which we learn that each of us is supposed to have a “brand” that we need to cultivate to “sell” our identity to other people.

When you’re living as a perpetual performer, the greatest problem is the tremendous pressure not to admit your mistakes. We see in the story of Adam and Eve how their self-consciousness

very quickly translates into blaming other people. When God confronts Adam about eating the fruit, Adam says, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). So it’s double blame. God, *you* gave me the woman, and *she* gave me the fruit. Then Eve of course blames the serpent for tricking her. This need to rationalize our mistakes and blame other people is called self-justification. It is the core mechanism that gives sin such crippling power over our lives. While sin does plenty of other damage, the main way that it imprisons us is by corrupting our integrity and corroding our ability to see the truth as we justify our sins and believe our lies over time. As this corrosion takes effect, we genuinely lose the ability to recognize reasonable expectations for our behavior in the relationships we have.

Psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson wrote a book about self-justification called *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*. They say that self-justification is caused by the need we have to make sense to ourselves and the discomfort we feel when we don’t. This discomfort is known as cognitive dissonance. When we are presented with facts that contradict a belief we are invested in, our cognitive dissonance pushes us to find reasons to discredit the facts instead of giving up our belief.

One of the most disturbing stories Tavris and Aronson share is about the manipulation of children by forensic psychologists during a phase of national hysteria about daycare child abuse in the early 1990s.¹ Since children have an innate desire to please adults, they will usually give the answer they think they’re supposed to give, rather than tell the actual truth. During an abuse trial for the Little Rascals Day Care Center run by Bob and Betsy Kelley in Edenton, North Carolina, the alleged victims told the psychologists (under their coaching) that they were not only being sexually abused but had also been forced to perform satanic rituals, had seen other children thrown into a shark-infested pool, and were taken on hot-air-balloon rides against their will.

Despite the increasing ridiculousness of the children’s stories, the district attorney’s office and the psychologists had too much invested in their case to pull out. Their need for self-justification

caused them to throw the Kelleys and four others in prison. All of the defendants eventually had their charges overturned, but nobody was ever held accountable for this horrible injustice committed by stubbornly self-justified prosecutors and psychologists.

Self-justification is the pernicious consequence of a life of perpetual performance. Not only our actions, but our words, our political ideologies, even our taste in jokes—everything about our self-presentation to the world—is driven by the need to be justified, to *make sense* to ourselves and others. Of course, it's also true that people rebel against the performances they feel pressured to perform. Teenage existence often exemplifies the antiperformance of irrational, self-destructive behavior whose sole purpose is to say, "You can't tell me what to do!"

Some people pull off self-justification very well. They're always right, they follow all the rules, and they never do anything that doesn't make sense. In contrast, those of us who suck at self-justification become cynics or demoralized self-abusers under its oppressive weight. But we never escape its prison; it just takes a different form. Once we have eaten Adam and Eve's fruit, our lives will always be a performance burdened in some way by self-justification, whether we smile and curtsy for our invisible judges, scream obscenities and flip them off, or collapse on the ground and cry.

The word in Greek for performer is *hypocrites* (pronounced hoopo-cree-tays), which means literally "under the critic." It did not originally have a negative connotation; it was simply the term used for actors on the stage. The meaning that the word has taken in English may be derived from the way that Jesus used it in his Sermon on the Mount, where he called out religion in his day for being one big performance:

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the [performers] do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand

is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

And whenever you pray, do not be like the [performers]; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. . . .

And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the [performers], for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6:2–6, 16–18, my translation)

In each of these three examples, charitable giving, praying, and fasting, Jesus says that the performers who do their acts publicly and flamboyantly receive one kind of reward, while people who do their religious deeds secretly will receive a secret reward. What is the difference between these two kinds of rewards? If you send out a press release every time you give lots of money to charity, your reward is not going to be small. People will hold banquets to honor you. Buildings will get named after you. Thousands of random strangers will want to be your Facebook friends.

But in the midst of all that, if your life is one photo op after another, then a little serpent voice will hiss in your soul, saying: “None of those people really love you; they don’t even know you.” I’ve been haunted by that serpent voice before. In my third year at the University of Virginia, I was a student leader. I had founded two different clubs and was active in many more. I wrote for the hipster alternative weekly newspaper. I had a brand and a public profile, but very few real friends.

On December 11, 1998, I attempted suicide and spent the weekend in the psych ward. This inaugurated a season of severe

depression. Every morning, the merciless critics inside my head would start their relentless commentary. I was a hypocrite in the original meaning of the word. I lived “under the critics,” phantom judges who made me feel like a phony, worthless waste of oxygen. After I had spent four long years walking under this dreadful weight, a church small group introduced me to Henri Nouwen’s *Life of the Beloved*. What Nouwen shared in that book is the “secret reward” that Jesus talks about in Matthew 6.

Accepting God’s Acceptance

Nouwen says that God is constantly reaching out to us with his love, trying to help us understand that we are his beloved.² It is the same voice that called down from heaven when Jesus was baptized in Matthew 3:17, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It’s not that God approves of everything we do. We’re not perfect like Jesus. God loves us, not because of anything we have done, but simply because God is love. Love is just what God does. It’s easy to say that God loves me as a sort of religious confession, but it’s tremendously difficult to actually *embody* this belief with my life. Nouwen elaborates:

As long as “being the Beloved” is little more than a beautiful thought or a lofty idea that hangs above my life to keep me from becoming depressed, nothing really changes. What is required is to become the Beloved in the commonplaces of my daily existence and, bit by bit, to close the gap that exists between what I know myself to be and the countless specific realities of everyday life.³

What Nouwen calls “becoming the Beloved” means for everything I do to be covered in my trust of the love that God has for me. When we’re performing for the critics, we are living the opposite of belovedness. Belovedness means living under the gaze of a God who watches us with such warmth that we stop worrying

about what to do with our hands when we dance. That warmth, if we allow ourselves to embrace it, can fill our hearts with the true, genuine worship that we lost when we were children.

I really believe that the warmth of God's loving gaze is the "secret reward" we discover when we give alms, pray, and fast with enough humility that it stops being a performance for our critics and becomes a secret dance of worship for the artist who made us. We can't hear God giddily gushing with love for us if our attention is preoccupied by the public accolades we want to receive for our good deeds. We hear only the standing ovations of people who don't really know us, whom we're right to suspect of using their flattery strategically as a springboard for their own platform building and brand development. As Nouwen proclaims throughout his book, we will always feel lonely, no matter how many friends and admirers we have, until we hear and trust the inner voice of God's love in our hearts.

When God gains our trust in his love, then he can save us from our frantic life of performing for the merciless critics in our head. Trusting in his love restores us to the life of worship that was lost when we fell under the curse of Adam and Eve's fruit. The question is whether we're willing to trust in God's mercy.

It isn't enough to change the audience for our performance from the world to God (which many Christians think we're supposed to do). As long as we think we're living "under the critic," whether it's the world or God himself, we will perform instead of worship. We will keep on trying to *justify ourselves* instead of *trusting in God's love*. Many Christians are so invested in their lives of performance that they have projected an acutely judgmental God critic for whom they think we're all supposed to perform, the "audience of one," in the words of contemporary Christian music. We could call this the Simon Cowell God after the infamously fastidious critic from the show *American Idol*.

A Simon Cowell God makes more sense to American sensibilities than the God of the beloved gaze whom Henri Nouwen writes about. Why? Because American culture trains us to be competitive divas who aren't going to settle for a certificate of participation. We want to have the winning gold-medal performance

that earns us a platform of honor nobody else can stand on. Religion has always been filled with divas trying to outperform each other. If you're really good at being right, it's to your advantage to make worshipping God into an übercompetitive performance of posturing with all the right pieties. This is how Christians turn the worship that is supposed to cultivate innocent delight in God into a masquerade ball of parroted right answers and exhibitionist false humility.

God loves it when we do our best. God loves hearing us sing our hearts out and watching us perform the deeds of our lives with excellence. But God doesn't want us to do anything out of an anxious need to justify ourselves. That's why God offers us the unconditional grace that can save us from the misery of self-justification. The Christian gospel teaches that instead of being justified by our good deeds or right answers, we are *justified by God's grace*. Romans 3:23–25a offers the best summary of this truth: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith."

Too many Christians believe that we have to *justify ourselves* by putting on a convincing performance of "faith" for a Simon Cowell God who needs to be persuaded by our performance not to send us to hell. This delusion straightjackets them into a life of pious posturing that makes them toxic to other people. God unilaterally *justifies us* "by his grace as a gift." We are not saved from God's disapproval. We are saved from the self-isolation of believing the serpent's lie and hiding in the bushes from God. Faith isn't the performance that passes God's test to earn us a ticket to heaven; it's the abolition of performance that liberates us from the hell of self-justification and restores us to a life of authentic worship.

We can put this in terms of the nakedness described in Adam and Eve's story. Adam and Eve saw that they were naked, so they made loincloths and hid in the bushes from God. Jesus saw Adam and Eve hiding their nakedness, so he got naked on the cross to make it safe for all of us to come out of the bushes. When we

can stop trying to justify our sins, since Jesus has put them on his cross, then we can step into the warm, loving gaze of our God. Losing ourselves in the beauty of that loving gaze is what it means to be saved from a life of performance so that we can worship again.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you remember a time from your childhood when you were able to worship without self-consciousness?
2. Do you see Adam and Eve's "eyes being opened" as a punishment? How would your life be different without this loss of innocence and curse of self-consciousness?
3. In what ways are you performing for other people right now?
4. Do you tend to see God as a harsh critic or a merciful parent?
5. What do you need to do to embrace your belovedness?