

This deeply personal devotional guide probes the heart with human stories and profound honesty. Thad shines a light on the depths of God's love in all our relationships. This is the way true love transforms those who humbly live in life's messy, everyday world.

—JOHN ARMSTRONG, president, ACT3 Network

Barnum has done it again. He has given us another volume in his Deeper Devotions series that will bless the soul of any person who seeks to know our Lord Jesus better and love Him more. This rich book—perfect for deeper daily devotional discipleship—at once enriches the mind and opens the eyes of the heart. I pray it finds a wide audience of real discipleship.

—LYLE W. DORSETT, Billy Graham professor of evangelism, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University; senior pastor, Christ the King Anglican Church

It's so refreshing to hear someone ask the hard questions about God, life, and loving others, which Thad so aptly does while encouraging us with the news that the answers are out there.

—JULIA DUIN, former religion editor, *The Washington Times*; author of *Quitting Church* and *Days of Fire and Glory*

In *Real Love*, Thad Barnum demonstrates what we need to follow Jesus well: putting our true hearts on the table before God. When we do, the Bible comes alive and God's grace is seen for the unspeakable power that it is. There we find the gentle, loving change we so desperately search for.

—TODD HUNTER, bishop; author of *Christianity Beyond Belief* and *Our Favorite Sins*

In this inspiring and very real devotional, Barnum leads us toward the heart of Jesus in brilliant and compelling ways. Each reading calls for further thought and reflection. The result is no less than a deeper love for ourselves, for others, and for our Lord.

—JO ANNE LYON, General Superintendent, The Wesleyan Church

The distance between knowing *about* love and actually *living* it is infinite. In wonderfully readable prose, my friend Thad Barnum helps us see what it means to know love and authentically live it, as God intended for us when He made us. It's actually possible! And since it's also one of the most important things in our lives, I'm thrilled to recommend this book.

—ERIC METAXAS, *New York Times* best-selling author of *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* and *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness*

Thad Barnum is a man who lives at the intersection of the Bible and daily life. In *Real Love*, he invites us to join him there. Thad writes about the highs and lows of life and everything in-between and how God's Word reveals God's love to us wherever we are. *Real Love* is a book about real life and the love we can experience if we have ears to hear and eyes to see.

—DAVID ROSENBERRY, dean and rector, Christ Church, Plano, TX

*Real Love* makes the biblical application in our contextual life a spiritual diagnosis. Bishop Thaddeus exposes and connects the truth of the Scripture to our life experience. Highly recommended for Bible study in groups.

—JOHN RUCYAHANA, president of National Unity and Reconciliation Commission; author of *Bishop of Rwanda*

Real love is something for which we all long and secretly doubt we will ever find. Thad Barnum renews our hope by showing us how a day-by-day relationship with Jesus pours real love into us so that it overflows from us to really change our love-parched world. Read this book and find what you long for in the One who longs for you.

—STEVE TREASH, senior pastor, Black Rock Congregational Church, Fairfield, CT

Barnum brings life to sacred texts and throws sacred texts on life as people live it in the midst of their own personal turmoil. I cannot recommend this book too highly.

—DAVID W. VIRTUE, president of Virtueonline, an orthodox Anglican Online News Service

Here is what you will find in these pages: Like the best of friends, Thad will be with you in your pain, tease you a bit if you are simply trying to put on a nice face, and invite you to enjoy and act upon a vision to love deeply from the heart.

—EDWARD T. WELCH, author, seminary professor, and counselor at CCEF in Glenside, PA

# REAL LOVE

WHERE BIBLE AND LIFE MEET

THADDEUS BARNUM



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To Gregor

Other books by Thaddeus Barnum include:  
*Never Silent, Remember Eve, Where Is God in  
Suffering and Tragedy?* and *Real Identity*.

For more information about these and other  
discipleship resources, visit the call2disciple ministry  
website at [www.call2disciple.com](http://www.call2disciple.com).

Thad's first devotional in this Deeper Devotion series,  
*Real Identity*, is available at [wphonline.com](http://wphonline.com).

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Use *Real Love* devotions to accompany group  
Bible studies or preaching in 1 John.

Free discipleship resources are available for download at  
[www.wphresources.com/reallove](http://www.wphresources.com/reallove).





## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Erilynne and I are having the best run. We're married thirty-three years this year—all of it has gone by so fast. But even now, as we look back, we realize we've always had the privilege of being in the heart of Christian community. It's how we started. We belonged to the best of churches where we experienced the wonder of the Lord's presence in worship, teaching, mission, and fellowship. It was led by a remarkable man, the Rev. Dr. Everett "Terry" Fullam, whose excellence in Bible teaching spanned the globe. He mentored us—like he did so many—strengthening our walk in Jesus and preparing us for a lifetime in His service. We can't imagine these devotions without Terry's signature on our lives.

Terry went to be with the Lord on March 15, 2014. We felt the best way to honor him was to introduce you to him. If you're longing for great Bible teaching, go to [www.lifeonwings.org](http://www.lifeonwings.org).

Fast forward, and we are surrounded by the fellowship of so many. Thank you Dad and Elena, Barry and Kate, for your unending love and prayers—especially for these writing projects. Teresa, my brother’s widow—you’re the best! Krissy, Susan, Jill, Jan—our daughters, their husbands and children—you brighten our life beyond measure. To Ken, David, Steve, and Quigg—thank you for holding me accountable. To our staff, parish council, and church family at Church of the Apostles, Fairfield, Connecticut—these devotions would never be possible without your kind encouragement.

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To the Lord be all praise and glory.

## INTRODUCTION



*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden,  
and I will give you rest.*

—MATTHEW 11:28

After Mom died in October 1973, my older brother, Gregor, and I entered our adult years rarely crossing paths. We simply couldn't find common ground. He gave himself to psychology and philosophy with as much passion as I gave myself to the Lord. Early on, we ended up butting heads nearly every time we talked. The two of us—well, it just didn't work.

As much as we tried to connect, superficial was about the best we could do. Weather, health, family, work. We always promised to talk soon. Always said we loved each other. But nothing ever came of it. And somehow years passed between us. For reasons of his own, he distanced himself from many in our family. He rarely came around. We'd see each other once or twice . . . a decade.

Until we entered our fifties.

We talked a little more. He came to some family events. The things that separated us didn't seem to separate us as

much. The bond between us was real and strong. He loved us — me, our dad, our sister Kate, and our families. And we loved him.

Surprisingly, he not only came to our dad's eighty-fifth birthday party in January 2012, but he and his wife actually stayed with Erilynne and me at our home for a night. It may sound small, but it was big to us. And what concerned us most that night was his health. He wasn't feeling well. He had all kinds of doctor appointments set up, and he looked scared.

So I called him more. He called me more.

Then the news came. On May 17, the doctors said he had metastasized cancer and months—maybe a year or more—to live.

After that, we talked or texted every day.

“I want to talk Bible,” he said, not long after. “Where do we start?”

It took me my complete surprise. “How 'bout tomorrow, late morning?” I asked, pushing him off.

“Cool,” he said.

And immediately I felt this pit in the center of my stomach. I was scared this conversation would hurt our relationship. It would spark debate between us and we'd quickly fall back to old patterns of butting heads. Arguing. Building walls between each other, and I didn't want that. Not now, especially now.

How do I do this?

So the next day I called him and admitted I was nervous. “I want to take this slowly, if you don't mind. And if it doesn't go well, let's stop, OK?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “but I really want this.”

So off we went. “There’s one place we have to start,” I said, taking him to Matthew 11:25–26. “It’s a passage where Jesus prayed to His Father and said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.’ This is important,” I interjected. “He’s setting ground rules. This has nothing to do with how brilliant we are.”

“No, I get that,” he came back.

“It means we can’t, with our own minds, understand God. Or the Bible. We need His help. He reveals Himself — if we come to Him as little children. It may sound unfair. But He doesn’t care if we’re scholars or simple-minded. People in the Third World living in poverty, who have no access to universities, have as much access to Him as we do. That’s the story.”

He surprised me. He was all in.

“Agreed, I like it. Now keep going,” he insisted.

So I asked him what he thought of verse 28. He read it out loud: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden.” And he stopped. There was silence on the phone between us. I waited until he finally read, “For I am gentle and humble in heart” (v. 29). I heard him take a deep sigh and say, “I’ve never seen that before.”

And here we were. The two of us. At the hardest place of all.

“Gregor, this is it,” I said to him. “This is everything. It’s the entire Bible in just a few words. Can you see it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“From the beginning, God created us to be in relationship with Him. We messed up. That’s why He came. It’s why He went to the cross—to right our wrong; so He could look us in the eye and say, ‘Come to Me. Be in relationship with Me. Real, dynamic, intimate relationship.’ This is His heart for us.”

“Say more,” he pressed.

“You and me—we’re not coming to a philosophy, a theological doctrine, a worldview of some kind. We’re coming to God Almighty. We are coming to His Son. He wants us to know Him and love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. He wants this relationship with us. That’s the beauty of it.”

I stopped and said nothing more. Not then. I knew I had stepped on sacred ground. Nothing plagued my brother more in life than broken relationships. It had always been hard—with women in the past, with his own family.

Between us.

“You OK?” he asked, wondering why I stopped.

“Yeah, kind of,” I said honestly.

“Why, what’s up?”

Part of me didn’t want to go on. I didn’t want to tell him the next piece of the story—that is, if we step into this relationship with Him, He requires that we step into relationship with each other. These two inseparable pieces are the exact reason I started writing devotions on 1 John. I knew, at the heart of John’s message, stood the royal law. That is, if we truly love God, if we believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior, then we must—by God’s decree—love one another.

And if we don't, John said we are liars and the truth is not in us (1 John 2:4).

In my world, especially in 2012, I witnessed great Christian leaders break from each other. Churches split apart. Marriages ended in divorce. Long-time Christian friends took sides against each other. Things were done, were said, that should never be named among those who belong to Jesus. But it was.

It is. Division in the body of Christ—it's everywhere. And I was just as much to blame. Even here—starting here—with my own brother.

So I told him everything. About broken relationships in the church, among pastors and leaders, between churches right across the street from each other, among Christian denominations who hold the same creedal faith in Christ. The breaks in my own life.

"It's not acceptable," I said. "He doesn't allow us to love Him and then refuse to make it real in the relationships in our lives. This is why I'm going through 1 John. It's why I write devotions like I do. I believe with all my heart that He wants to take us to the place where Bible and life meet. Where what we say and how we live are one and the same. It doesn't matter if we believe something is true. It matters whether it's real in our lives. And if we're going to say we love the Lord, then we have to do what He says and love each other with as much passion as He, in Christ, has loved us."

"I agree," he shot back quickly.

And then he surprised me—again.

"I want to do this with you," he thundered.



“Really?”

“Yeah. You OK with that?”

“Yes, absolutely!” I agreed. And suddenly, the two of us—well, it just worked. Runners in stride for the first time since the days of our youth.

“We should’ve done this a long time ago,” he said later.

And more than anything—in these days of his sickness—I wanted all those years back, with decades more to come.





PART 1

BEHIND  
THE TREE

*— — — — —*



## LET'S TALK RELATIONSHIPS



## Reflections on Matthew 5:21–23

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know  
my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful  
way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.*

—PSALM 139:23–24

I sit at my desk holding a letter in my hand. The man who wrote it is my friend. We've known each other the better part of twenty years. And, if I were honest with myself, he's family to me, like a brother.

I trust him. I love him.

But the last few months have been hard between us. What can I say? In my opinion, he made a wrong decision. He fell hard into a world of church politics and chose the way that brought him acceptance and favor. For as long as I've known him, that's not been his story. He's always stood for what is right and true and honorable when it comes to our Lord.

Better than me.

He's always been there, at my side, the moment I waver. Poking and prodding. Sometimes gentle, sometimes not, because that's what we do for each other in Christ. Though it's been hard on occasion, we've grown stronger over the

years. We've been iron sharpening iron in the best way possible (Prov. 27:17). Until now.

The letter is three months old. I keep it in my journal so I never forget, day after day, to beg God to heal the break between us. And again, for the umpteenth time, my eyes fall on the words that hurt the most:

*I never thought this day would come. How dare you judge me for what I've done. You stab me with your words having no idea you're in the wrong. Not me. And you're too blind to see it. You've broken trust. You've torn the bond between us that I can't imagine will ever be repaired. Not easily. Not unless the Lord steps between us. But even then . . . I wonder.*

He asks me not to call. Not write. Not for a while.

You have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not commit murder" and "Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court." But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, "You good-for-nothing," shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, "You fool," shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

—MATTHEW 5:21–22

In the days following his decision, I strongly opposed him. I was fully convinced I could change his mind. I gave

him everything I had—just as he'd done with me countless times. But it didn't work. The more I pressed, the more he dug in.

He said the same of me.

I got angry with him. Why push me away like this? Am I nothing to him? And why couldn't he see the consequences of his decision? People were hurt. All kinds of relationships were being torn apart—just like ours. But still he stood his ground and turned it all back on me. I found myself reacting in the worst kind of way. I started to quietly distance myself from him emotionally, pretending I didn't care—when I did.

Our last phone call scared me. Not in what he said. But rather, in the way he said it. The tone in his voice disarmed me completely. I lost the fight to argue. Or defend. Or re-posture. I was suddenly aware I was losing—or had just lost—my dear friend. This story was changing us. Something I never dreamed possible. So rather than mounting my next assault, I stopped the conversation.

I told him I loved him. I told him I was sorry for the way I'd handled these past weeks.

He sighed and quietly agreed. We ended the call on a semi-peaceful note. But that was it. We wouldn't talk again for months.

A few days later, his letter came in the mail.

As the weeks passed, I prayed for him every day. At first, it was all about him. I kept saying the same thing: “Lord Jesus, correct his wrong, bring him around, and make our relationship right again. Like all this never happened.”

But eventually, the Lord stepped in and shifted my prayers. It wasn't all about my friend anymore. I couldn't escape the conviction that I'd broken the most important of all God's commands. The one He gave us at the dawn of time. The same one perfectly modeled by all the Lord Jesus Christ said and did.

Because it's Him. It's His law—the royal law (James 2:8).  
We are to love one another.

So what was I doing living in a broken relationship with a friend as close as a brother? What was my part in it? Why did I let it happen? How am I supposed to balance the tension between hating his decision and yet not compromising either my love for him or for the Lord and His command? Who does this well?

This isn't easy.

And so I started praying King David's prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart. . . . And see if there be any hurtful way in me" (Ps. 139:23–24). I also started working my way through the epistle of 1 John realizing, at every turn, the apostle's message thunders with unmistakable strength and power: Relationships are *everything* in the kingdom of God. And that means we can't love God and hate our neighbor. If we do, when we do, we call Him a liar. We walk in darkness (1 John 2:4, 9).

But real love, when it comes down from heaven and fills our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), we do differently. We live differently.

He has work to do in me. And He has work to do in us, His church. For "if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in

the Light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7) and that fellowship, that light, has the power to turn the world upside down.

For Him, and for His glory.

A few more months passed.

In my office, one late afternoon, the phone rang. I looked at the caller ID and it was him. I froze. I could feel my heart start to race. I didn't want to answer it simply because I feared another setback.

“Hey,” I said softly, my guard down.

“Have you got a few minutes?” he asked, his voice sounding troubled. He was driving home after a day of meetings that didn't go well and wanted to talk. He told me there were a lot of things in his life that weren't going well and, slowly, he began to share. Piece by piece. Opening his heart to me, trusting me again. Talking like we used to talk. As if this horrible mess between us was over.

“I haven't had the peace of Christ in me. Not since we broke,” he said.

“Me too,” I confessed.

“If you don't mind, I don't want to go back over it all again. Not right now. Is that OK?” he asked.

“Yeah. We will, in time.”

“I'd like that,” he said quietly. And somehow, at that moment, we began to find our stride again. As if we'd both learned what we thought we already knew. Yes, in Christ, we're allowed to disagree with each other. Sharply. Strongly. But there are rules that govern us. Kingdom rules that can never be broken. Ever.


He commands us to love each other. As Christ loved us.  
This is His story. It's meant to be our story.  
And I want it with all my heart.

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION\*



What would happen in your life if you made Psalm 139:23–24 your prayer? How would it affect you if you applied it to broken relationships in your life?

How are we supposed to balance the tension between disagreeing with someone and the command to love them in Jesus Christ? How would we do relationships differently if, no matter the issue, we let the royal law govern our hearts?



*\* The reflection at the end of each devotion is designed to encourage prayer, journaling, and conversation in small group settings. It's easy to read and go on. It's better to read, stop, and engage in dialogue and prayer.*



## OUT FROM THE SHADOWS



## Reflections on 1 John 1:7

*But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

—1 JOHN 1:7

I wrote in my journal:

*I wonder, has this verse ever been read before?*

*I mean, come on, what if it said, "This is the cure for cancer"? Don't you think every Christian would know this verse by heart? Don't you think the world would beat down our doors just to get the cure? Cancer would be gone forever—the suffering and pain of a disease that took both my mother and my brother.*

*And that's exactly what this verse does. It shouts, "This is the cure for all broken relationships for all time. Come and taste! It never fails."*

*Never.*

*Of course, the world mocks as it passes by our church doors. And well it should. We are a divided, broken people. We worship in separate churches. We're split into thousands of denominations. Our marriages sealed in Christ end in divorce just as much as the world around us. Brothers and sisters who love Jesus and hold to His gospel fight and can't even talk to each other.*

*As if this tiny superpower verse didn't exist.*

*Great movements have tried and failed to unite the Christian church. Even now, a younger generation is rising up and demanding that Christians, who are Christians indeed, holding to the ancient faith, come together in Jesus every once in a while. For fellowship. For worship. For mission. They know what we all know. Something is wrong, really, really wrong.*

*Well, here is the cure. Right here.*

*I don't think the problem is that we haven't read the verse. Or that we haven't understood it. Or that we don't realize the power that's available to us.*

*I think the problem is that we don't want to do it.*

But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light,  
we have fellowship with one another.

— 1 JOHN 1:7

I put down the journal and stared at the verse again.  
I immediately rewrite it:

*But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with . . . HIM!*

Doesn't that make more sense? I mean, if we walk with Him, we have fellowship with Him. Right? Isn't it that simple?

And isn't that what it means to be "saved"? At some point, the light of the Lord Jesus Christ penetrates our hard, cold

hearts. We know our sin, confess our sin, and believe in the free-flowing grace of Calvary that washes, forgives, and sets us free in new life. Isn't that the whole gospel message?

Fellowship with Him. Just me and Him.

Then I stumble on the little tiny word—*walk*. That makes it tough. Being saved isn't a one-time step into the Light. We're meant to step . . . and stay.

So here's the deal. I do what Adam did. I hide behind his tree in Eden and every once in a while, I step out. Little steps. Baby steps. Sometimes huge steps—depending if I'm really in need or if I've really messed up. And then, first chance I get, I run back into the shadows—quick. And stay as long as I can.

How's that for a summary of the Christian life? Years and years of stepping out, running back, stepping out, running back. Until the day we die. All of it real simple, focused on just me and Him. It's not about you. Got that? Which, by the way, is why I have no problem being separate from you.

And—little secret—that's why I needed to rewrite the verse.

But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the  
Light, we have fellowship with one another.

—1 JOHN 1:7

The cure.

It's not complex. It's not riddled with legal loopholes or impossible moral demands. It's not designed for the elite, intellectual, sophisticated mind more than the simple and uneducated. It's available to all. The rich and poor. Young and old. The saints who have their acts together and the sinners who don't. It's not complex. That's the wonder of it. Its simplicity has only one demand.

Just step out from behind the tree.

Then stand there, before the Lord, in His presence.

It won't take long for us to be on our knees in worship before Him. Nor will it take long to know the condition of our hearts as He begins to peel back the layers of hurt and hate, pride and rebellion, self-will and self-reliance, a heart of stone rather than a heart filled with His Holy Spirit. This is what He does, gently leading us to repentance, humility, and brokenness.

If we could just stay here for a little while and not run back behind the tree, we'd find there's something wonderful and holy that happens: "The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

The love of God fills our hearts by the Holy Spirit. There's cleansing in and by the blood of Jesus. And that's the cure. As long as we stay in the Light, as He is in the Light, "we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7).

But we have to make the choice to come out from the shadows and step into His presence. We have to choose the path of humility and brokenness. That's where it all starts. And if

we start there, He will turn our hearts toward each other and we will see each other differently—love each other differently.

If we do it together, we will find the cure together.

And more. We will have a new compassion for those who love the Lord and refuse to come out from the shadows—stuck deep behind the shadow of their tree. We will also have a new heart for people who aren't in the kingdom, lost in the darkness of this world. It's here where we taste the kind of miraculous superpower love that prays for those who hate us, abuse us, and stomp on us.

If we could just stay here . . .

But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

—1 JOHN 1:7

The problem isn't that I don't know this. The problem is that I do.

And every once in a while, I find myself in church with a company of people who have stepped out of the shadows, into His presence, and I'm overwhelmed by it all again. By the worship in the Holy Spirit. By the fellowship of the people. And I find the cure pours deep into my soul so that, in me, compassion starts welling up for those I never thought I'd have compassion for. But I do.

And it makes me want to stop hiding. And take a few steps . . . just out from the shadows.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION



Can you imagine what the Christian church would be like if we who belong to Jesus apply this verse to our relationships together? Start with you. Here's the cure; do you want it?

And can you imagine how we'd win the hearts of those outside the church? Again, start with you and someone who does not believe in Christ. How would you be different, act different, toward them?

15  
LIGHTEN UP



Reflections on 1 John 2:9

*The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates  
his brother is in the darkness until now.*

—1 JOHN 2:9

I finished the afternoon meeting, got back to my hotel room, and collapsed in the chair by the desk, exhausted. Everything inside me wanted to pack my bags, head to the airport, and go home. But I couldn't. I had to study. I had to pray.

I was preaching in a few hours.

But how could I? I felt strangely violated. Like I'd been forced to see things, hear things, feel things I wanted nothing to do with. Things that should never have been spoken out loud and were—with mocking laughter. But not just that. There was more. Somehow I was part of it all, and I didn't like it.

This story has been my story too. In the past.

But not like this. Or, maybe, too much like this.

I saw a pen on the desk and a pad of paper. I decided I needed to get up, take a shower, clear my head, and turn

my mind to the service that night. But before I did, I picked up the pen and wrote down the words piercing my heart.

“We are a violent people—it’s what we do.”

The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates  
his brother is in the darkness until now.

—1 JOHN 2:9

A pastor from a Methodist church had invited me to preach the opening service of a conference. I asked if I could fly in early and interview him and a few of his clergy. He agreed and took us all out to lunch.

From the moment we sat down, I felt like I’d been welcomed into an elite circle of good, close friends. The talk between them was seamless, a fluid motion moving from topic to topic, all in a language that could only be spoken after years spent together. There was trust here, loyalty, respect.

With one driving passion: being a church that reached a lost world.

“We have no other goal,” one of the pastors told me, “than to bring Christ to our city.”

During lunch, they talked freely. Every once in a while they looked at me, the odd man out, and teased me into the conversation. I was glad to join in. I told them my interest was in how they—as clergy—did relationships together.



They didn't pick up on it right away.

They wanted to talk mission. It's what excited and thrilled them: when and where to start the next new church; how to raise up leaders in different parts of the city to host home groups; what hot topics the twenties and thirties crowd care about most so they could sponsor an event, bring in a speaker, start a conversation, and gently lead people to Christ. Like they'd done before.

Every once in a while a name popped up. A name I didn't know. Then another. Then another. And with these names, came words. Harsh, vulgar words.

"He's such a jerk," or, "The man's a freak," or, "He's got an IQ of zero. Not exactly playing with a full deck."

And they'd laugh, making fun of them in quick side comments, with rolling eyes and odd expressions they've probably done a hundred times together. And within seconds, they'd be back on topic. Not missing a beat.

It happened once. And twice. And ten times in a half hour.

I finally raised my hand and got their attention.

"Who are these people?" I asked. I'd written their names down and read them off. "You mock these people and make fun of them. Who are they? What do they do?"

"Great question!" one of them said and sat up and posed, distorted his face, and did, apparently, a perfect imitation of one of them. It was like a skit from *Saturday Night Live* and it sent the table full of pastors into hysterics. One after the other jumped in, the senior pastor leading the pack.

Somehow, perversely, as it always does, deepening their bond together.

I stood up from the table and excused myself. I could feel my heart pounding, a crazed anger inside that had sparked and burst into flame. I could feel my face hot to the touch, and I knew it was best just to go. To the men's room. Cold water splashing freely on my face. I was half bent over and waiting for my heart to calm when I heard the door behind me open and I saw, in the mirror, the senior pastor coming in.

“You OK?” he asked.

I looked at him with a blank stare, having no words to respond.

“You looked pretty upset back there. I don't know what you got yourself all worked up over but if you want some personal advice from me . . .” he said in a low, southern accent and then hesitated, maybe so I'd hear him loud and clear. “You need to lighten up a little bit.”

The one who says he is in the Light and yet hates  
his brother is in the darkness until now.

— 1 JOHN 2:9

I don't know how I got through the opening address that night. I'm just glad I did. The Lord was kind to help me put the upset of the afternoon aside and let me do what I

love best—to speak the Word of God, by the Spirit of God, for the people of God.

But I was a mess inside.

I'd walked into a world that frightened me. An inside world of close colleagues that I had no business being part of, not even for a minute. They let me see what I shouldn't have seen and hear what I shouldn't have heard. And I wanted to stop them. I wanted to tell them what they were doing was wrong. Completely wrong.

We are not allowed to speak of others like that—ever.

We cannot say that we, ourselves, are walking with Jesus, walking in the Light, in communion with the Father, filled with the Holy Spirit, passionate about reaching the lost, while with our tongues, our hearts, we hate. We trash. We violently rip apart people with screams of laughter and a volley of fist-pumps.

But I said nothing. Not then. I waited until the conference was over. And then, alone with the senior pastor, I told him my story.

I've done the same thing. In my past. I still do from time to time without even knowing it. In my little, close-knit world of colleagues, friends, and family, where it's safe. Where we're bonded together, loyal and true. Where we can talk freely about people—and do what they don't know we're doing.

Laugh and mock, slander and hate.

I told him the afternoon scared me.

How could I “lighten up” when, in being with these pastors, I saw a picture of myself—of what I've done—of

what I should never have done or do? How is it possible to love the Lord with all my heart and then speak of others this way? Just to be welcomed into the group? Just to join the camaraderie and fun?

It's hypocritical. It's wrong. It's completely wrong.

"That's your problem, not ours," he shot back. I looked at him, saddened, and said out loud the words that still pierced my heart. But this time, I think it was meant for me.

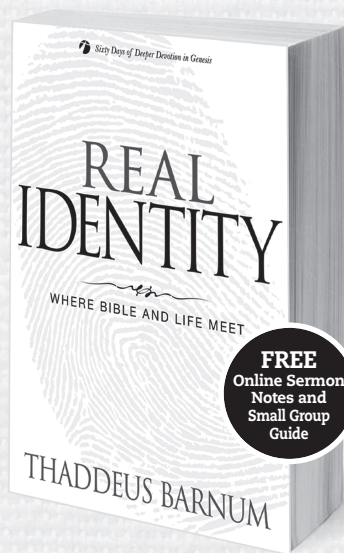
"We are a violent people. It's what we do."

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

With our tongues, we speak against people for whom our Lord died. Why do we do this so freely? How can you—and how can you help others—do what's right in the Lord's sight?

John's passion is to take what we believe and make it real in our lives. His imagery contrasts light and dark. What do you need from the Lord to help you break from patterns that belong to the dark?

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