

MATT BROWN

FOREWORD BY LEE STROBEL

TRUTH
PLUS
LOVE

THE *JESUS* WAY TO INFLUENCE

PREFACE

As an evangelist and the founder of Think Eternity, I find that a solid half of our ministry today happens online. So it's hard for me to imagine a time when I owned neither a computer nor a phone! But it's true. I used to brag to my friends in Bible college that I didn't need a cell phone. Even though they were becoming more common at that time, I was determined to curb their influence in my life.

Years later I learned that my ancestors on my dad's side were German Mennonites who immigrated to the United States and found the flat plains of Kansas and southern Minnesota to be much like their former home. Mennonites traditionally regard technology with more suspicion than most people, so maybe my bragging about not having a phone was an unconscious echo of my ancestors' beliefs!

My great-great-uncle Henry Brown was the first Mennonite missionary to China. He and his wife spent their lives there, administering medical care to the sick, preaching the gospel, and establishing churches with indigenous leaders. During the Japanese occupation, he spent time in prison for preaching the gospel. He wrote several books about his work, and while

reading them, I was shocked to find that a hundred years before I began traveling and preaching across Minnesota, Henry Brown, as an itinerate preacher, had preached in some of the same places in an effort to raise support for his missionary work. It's possible that we even visited some of the same towns and traveled some of the same roads, sharing the wonderful hope of Jesus Christ!

So perhaps I have deeply rooted reasons for being slow to get on social media. My older brother even forced me onto one of the early platforms by signing me up himself, but as I began to blog, my mind slowly changed. I realized I could use social media on my phone and computer for ministry. In many ways, the digital world is our new missions frontier.

I now spend a lot of my life online, as do most of us. In fact, it's an incredible time to be a Christian because a Wi-Fi connection has given us a larger megaphone than ever before to talk about Jesus. At Think Eternity, we've been doing evangelistic ministry online and through live events for seventeen years.

But we don't always use the internet well, and that's why I've written this book.

On one of our ministry trips to the East Coast years ago, I had a powerful encounter that taught me a lesson about the opportunity and responsibility we have with our online megaphones.

A warm blast of late spring air greeted us as we drove to our host's home in northern Virginia. My wife, Michelle, and I, along with another couple, had been on a preaching tour across the Midwest and down the East Coast for nearly two months. On the last leg of our journey, we anticipated ministering to some great churches on the outskirts of our nation's capital. As we stepped into our hosts' home we were greeted by pictures on the walls of our host with various US presidents and other

world leaders. The hallway was lined with thank-you cards and personal greetings from presidents and celebrities.

Our stay had been God-ordained, a needed pit stop after months of travel, and we developed a meaningful, timely friendship with Doug, our host, who is also one of the best writers I know. We spent several weeks with Doug and his wife, and they would make us a big breakfast every morning and shower us with kindness and encouragement. At the time, I'd been working feverishly on my first book, and in the course of our conversations, Doug offered to review my draft. Without my even asking, he wrote one of the kindest endorsements I could've asked for. I felt undeserving to have a *New York Times* bestselling author and former assistant to a US president endorse my writing, but that is just the way he and his wife were: gracious and hospitable in a way that bordered on being magical. Doug's endorsement for my book read in part, "Matt Brown is like a Francis Schaeffer for a new generation."

That was the first I'd ever heard of Schaeffer, so I tracked down a half-century-old book by him called *The Mark of the Christian*, and I sensed God's divine nudge about the importance of truth plus love. Sometimes even a single passage can change your life:

This attitude [of love toward other Christians and the balance of love and holiness] must be constantly and consciously developed—talked about and written about in and among our groups and among ourselves as individuals.

In fact, this must be talked about and written about *before* differences arise between true Christians. We have conferences about everything else. Who has ever heard of

a conference to consider how true Christians can exhibit in practice a fidelity to the holiness of God and yet simultaneously exhibit in practice a fidelity to the love of God before a watching world? Whoever heard of sermons or writings which carefully present the practice of two principles which at first seem to work against each other: (1) The principle of the practice of the purity of the visible church in regard to doctrine and life, and (2) the principle of the practice of an observable love and oneness among *all* true Christians.

If there is no careful preaching and writing about these things, are we so foolish as to think that there will be anything beautiful in the practice when differences between true Christians must honestly be faced?

Before a watching world, an observable love in the midst of difference will show a difference between Christians' differences and other men's differences. The world may not understand what the Christians are disagreeing about, but they will very quickly understand the difference of our differences from the world's differences if they see us having our differences in an open and observable love on a practical level.¹

Boom. Wow. Who writes like that anymore? And how we need this message today! The necessity for Christians everywhere to walk in both truth and love has only grown since Schaeffer wrote those words.

You may think that writers look for trendy topics that respond to some felt need, but for me, the theme of truth plus love has weighed so heavily on my heart for so long that I can't *not* write about it. This topic is an important one, a vitally

important one, and shockingly few people have written about it. For four years now, God has been putting on my heart this idea about the fragile, life-giving balance of truth and love in the life of a Christian.

Today we face bigger giants than ever. Christians all over the world now have something Francis Schaeffer's generation never had: the internet and social media. Now every Christian who is, by default, a representative of Jesus to the watching world, either for good or bad, has a megaphone through their social media accounts. They can instantly proclaim whatever comes to their mind and whatever half-thought-through response they have to any given subject, political issue, or tragedy, whether or not it's what the Bible says about that subject.

More voices are shouting more loudly and more frequently than ever before, and therefore our need to understand Francis Schaeffer's words about truth and love is greater than ever before.

Important Questions for Christians Today

How should Christians engage with, and respond to, a watching world?

How should Christians represent both the love and the truth of Jesus?

Do we need to respond to every controversy, tragedy, or problem that arises in our world?

Why is our world filled with so many broken relationships?

How can some Christians be so sweet in person but so angry on their social media accounts?

What would happen if more Christians brought their statements in line with both the love and the truth that the Bible talks about?

In this book, I speak about these questions and many more. I hope that, like me, you will see that we, as Christians, have a biblical mandate to walk in both truth and love—a mandate that could change the whole world.

And now, with Francis Schaeffer's half-century-old call echoing in my heart and prompting me onward, let's get started.



CHAPTER 1

WHERE HAS OUR INFLUENCE GONE?

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

EPHESIANS 4:15 ESV



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As I sipped the golden brown foam off the top of the most delicious cappuccino I've ever tasted—my wife, Michelle, and I looked out from the crowded coffeehouse, across the cobblestone streets, to the Pantheon, one of the wonders of ancient Rome. Once used for the worship of various gods, the Pantheon eventually became a worship hall for Christians, and now, two thousand years later, it overflows with tourists for it still captivates the imagination with awe and wonder. It is an architectural masterpiece in the heart of Rome, just blocks from the Vatican, and a twenty-minute walk from the Colosseum. So much history has unfolded in these streets. My taste buds—as well as my mind—were exploding with sensory overload and bliss.

I'd long wanted to visit the nation of my Italian grandmother Longiotti's roots. The opportunity finally came after Michelle and I had been married a few years, and we decided to visit Milan, Florence, and Rome. Milan had the feel of a global city, with a lot of high-end shopping. Florence had the air of old Italy. And Rome, once the epicenter of the earth, is the eternal city, home to not only the Vatican but countless ancient wonders. There you find the modernity of today's world, but you can also get lost in the cobblestone streets and artifacts, not to mention the pizza, spaghetti, and coffee of a past world.

Two quaint coffee shops near the Pantheon transported me to coffee heaven: La Casa del Tazza d'Oro and Sant'Eustachio Il Caffè. Let me say that the coffee is pretty much any coffee

shop in Italy tastes better than the best coffee in the US, but that being said, the coffee in these two shops tasted like liquid gold. I don't know how it's possible for something to taste that good.

Rome was breathtaking. Aside from getting lost on cobblestone walkways, admiring the architecture, and savoring the food, we visited many ancient sites, including the Colosseum. This is where countless gladiators were forced to do battle in front of thousands of onlookers who jeered and cheered the warriors to their death. It's hard to believe that any culture could be so callous as to make sport out of something like this, but it's part of our human story.

Christians have always been at odds with the culture around them, and the first Christians were no exception. At times, the Roman Empire persecuted Christians for worshipping Jesus rather than the Emperor. Christians claimed to be part of a different kingdom, and for that they were perceived as a threat. Much of this persecution happened right there in the Colosseum. We paid to gain entrance and wound down the ancient stairwells and peered into the underground halls and closures that housed both victims and animals.

It was here that ancient Christians knelt and cried out to God for deliverance before being fed to the beasts in front of the mocking crowds. There are no words to express the horror of what took place. The savagery that Christians have endured throughout history, including being persecuted around the world today, reminds us of the mind-boggling value of our faith. Those Christians could have simply denied Jesus and been set free, but they valued what Christ meant to them more than their own lives.

After our tour, we visited a few other ancient buildings and then wound our way back around the Colosseum in search of

lunch. After a quick bite, we continued down the street and stumbled upon an old church. Its underground passages seemed to take us farther and farther back in history until, at the bottom of the site, we entered rooms and halls where some of the very first Christians worshiped and prayed. Most likely, they prayed for some of their own who were being taken to the Colosseum to their deaths. They prayed for their communities and their city and the world that the message of Jesus would be carried far and wide through their witness. They prayed for, and possibly along with, the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter before both of those men were martyred in the city. We were breathing the air of legends!

As we wound down those stairs, deeper and deeper into the roots of our collective Christian faith, we couldn't help but sense the magnitude of what we've inherited today in Christ, in the church. This isn't some newfound faith, where we get to make up the rules as we go. We stand on the shoulders of all those who have gone before us, with their abiding faith and unforgettable impact on the world. Their faith helps us grasp the gravity of our faith today. Jesus, the Hope of the world, has worked in countless lives through the centuries, including our own.

But sometimes it can feel as if we're doing pitifully little compared to those Christians who gave their lives in the Colosseum or those on whose shoulders of prayers and sacrifice the first churches were built. The gospel spread at breakneck speed long before internet was ever invented. Those early Christians knew that the message had transformed their lives, and they showed it in everything from their passion to spread the gospel to the very act of martyrdom—giving their lives rather than denying the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God has a place and a purpose for us today as well. He wants

to build His beautiful kingdom on our shoulders too. He is working in and through us to help us follow Him. He created us and saved us for good works, which He has prepared in advance for us to do. We are part of this great adventure of representing God to our world.

Too often Christians focus exclusively on the message of the gospel. As an evangelist, I know the message is vitally important, but the Bible also has a lot to say about our attitudes and character, about how we talk to others, how we treat them, and how we comport ourselves. Those things are just as important as making sure we get all the doctrinal points correct.

The result of this imbalance has played out in our culture over the past decades as we read such headlines as “Young people are leaving the church in droves.” It makes sense if you consider how poorly some Christians represent Jesus these days. Anyone with a social media “megaphone” feels they have the authority to tear others down. Just yesterday I saw someone tear down a pastor I deeply respect, a man who has spent his life teaching the Bible and leading thousands to faith in Jesus. This person publicly scolded him, saying he was “an embarrassment to Jesus” and that God “was ashamed of him.” What he said couldn’t be farther from the truth.

I see personal attacks like this all the time, and from Christians no less. Christians today are known more for what they are against than what they are for, which is sad, considering we are supposed to have good news to offer the world that already has enough bad news. We see it all the time: Christians who constantly correct each other, rebuke each other, even speak angrily to people they’ve never met. There’s even a hashtag on twitter for this: #JesusJuke, which means using the Bible

to one-up or correct strangers on the internet who you think are wrong.

Nowhere in Scripture does God give us permission to be a jerk. It's that kind of Christianity that turns people away from the gospel every single day. How is the world supposed to see the grace of God if the people of God are not gracious? We have a problem when we try to do the Great Commission without the compassion of Christ.

Truth Plus Love

Maybe I spend too much time on social media, but I see it every day—Christians who are supposed to be marked by the love of Christ who sound anything but loving. There is too much angry, critical, cynical, judgmental Christianity in the world. Too many Christians are trying to prove their point and to have the last word. But I believe if they could see what the Bible says about this, they would see how God wants them to grow in their faith in ways they've neglected before.

The Bible talks a lot about truth plus love. Paul writes about it in his letter to the Ephesians, the first half of which contains no direct commands other than “remember,” meaning that he doesn't tell them to “do” anything *new*. Rather, he calls them back to the gospel—the main event of history itself—encouraging them to be captivated by all God has done for them in Jesus. That first chapter contains the largest run-on sentence in the Bible, and twice in the first half of the letter he breaks out into prayer. He cannot contain his excitement about Jesus and what Jesus does in our lives!

Paul prays that these believers—and all believers at all

times—would be captivated and overwhelmed by the gospel and that God would open their spiritual eyes to all they have in Christ. One of the most amazing parts of all of this is that Paul was writing from prison, and yet in spite of his circumstances, he was full of wonder and joy because of the gospel.

The last half of his letter, in contrast to its opening, contains forty direct commands. In other words, he was saying to believers, here is what you do to follow Him. One of these powerful commands is found in the middle of Ephesians 4: “*Speaking the truth in love*, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4:15 ESV, emphasis added).

Did you see it? *Truth plus love*. That is the formula God has given us for influencing our world and living an effective Christian life. God has called us to a balance of both truth and love, not just emphasizing one or the other. If we do that, we will “grow up in every way” in Jesus Christ.

Jesus set the example. One of His closest friends and followers, John, tells us about this balance in Jesus’s life: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, *full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14 NIV, emphasis added). Better than anyone Jesus walked in both truth and love, and He calls those of us who follow Him to do the same.

The apostle Paul spoke elsewhere about these two traits: “We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and *by our sincere love*. *We faithfully preach the truth*. *God’s power is working in us*. We use the weapons of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 6:6–7 NLT, emphasis added). Right in the middle of his list of important traits, Paul says sincere love and faithful preaching of the truth will prove the

impact of our faith and ministry. He adds that God's power works in him to do both. Not only do these verses package truth and love together, but you'd be hard pressed to read much of the Bible without seeing those two as its major themes.

Truth and love are the two legs of the Christian. Without both we don't get far. God's power works in us when we walk in both truth and love, and we will be influential for the sake of the gospel.

Solomon, the wisest person before Jesus, affirms this idea: "Whoever *pursues righteousness and love* finds life, prosperity and honor" (Proverbs 21:21 NIV, emphasis added), and "Do not let *kindness and truth* leave you; Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart" (Proverbs 3:3 NASB, emphasis added). And then the New Living Translation adds, "Then you will find favor with both God and people, and you will earn a good reputation" (Proverbs 3:4 NLT). The essential idea is that truth and love work together in harmony to honor God and, through us, influence others for good. The Bible tells us that when we walk in truth and love we find abundant life, honor, favor from God and other people, and a good reputation. Many of these traits can be summarized in one word: *influence*.

If we look thoughtfully at how the Christian is supposed to walk distinctively in both truth and love, we begin to see how we influence our world for good. What if, when a tragedy strikes or a political controversy arises, Christians everywhere responded on their social media feeds with a uniquely Christian graciousness? What if we weren't the first to attack and didn't act like stray dogs hovering over helpless prey, waiting to move in for the kill? What if we expressed an unusual love, an unusual graciousness, and responded with the mind of Christ, keeping in

step with the Spirit? What if we spoke the truth, always in love, and what if those words brought healing and comfort and peace to a world that is parched for peace? What if?

Don't get me wrong. Many Christians do this today, but even more do not. A couple of older men I know are incredibly kind in person, but on their Facebook pages they sound like raging maniacs. They stomp all over everyone else's political opinions, and their posts sound angry, bitter, and demeaning. I don't think that's who they really are; they just don't understand how they come across to a watching world. When I read their posts, my blood pressure rises as I sense the toxic nature of their attitude.

Is this who Jesus wants us to be? Is this what He's called His church to do? The Bible speaks clearly against this type of attitude, and we will delve into many of those verses throughout this book.

God has called His people to be influencers for the sake of the gospel, and He has given us a specific set of attitudes to pick up (and some to lay down) to be effective for His cause, in our relationships, and in our interactions with the rest of the world. Think of Jesus—He attracted large crowds wherever He went for both His miracles and His teaching. He spoke the truth, but He was also marked by a profound love, which drew crowds of people, including his disciples, to Him. He wielded both. Truth and love. And that is exactly what God calls each and every Christian to do.

Truth Minus Love = Noise

If we constantly shout the truth of God but don't walk in the love of God, Scripture says we are "nothing." We will sound like a "clanging cymbal" to the world—an annoying noise. We will be weak and ineffective in our witness, and our relationships

will be dysfunctional. In short, we won't walk in the abundant life Jesus promised us.

I know a man who was prone to bitterness about nearly everything in our culture. One time he got so angry at the General Mills company that he drove to their headquarters in the Twin Cities and burned boxes of Cheerios on their front lawn. Did he have the right to protest? Yes. Did such an act honor God or help him walk in the peace and joy that Christ offers to us? Not at all. In fact, within a week, sadly, this man died of a heart attack. James said, "Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires" (James 1:20 NLT).

God did not intend for us to spend our lives being angry about everyone and everything we don't agree with. Instead, God invites us to walk through our lives with supernatural peace. Jesus tells us, "I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid" (John 14:27 NLT).

Love Minus Truth = Error

If we focus solely on the love of God but ignore the truth of God, we lose the power to save.

We live in a unique time. Major denominations are giving license to sin, and many Christians believe that if they are saved by grace, then they can give license for others to sin. But the Bible clearly warns us against this:

I say this because some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God's marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives. The condemnation of such

TRUTH PLUS LOVE

people was recorded long ago, for they have denied our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. (Jude 4 NLT)

No matter what sin we're mired in, we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but Jesus also calls us to repent and follow Him—to be a follower, not simply a fan. As imperfect as we are, Jesus wants to save us from sin, and He wants us to grow in holiness.

This is a core gospel issue. The fact that Jesus saves us from our sin—and calls us to walk away from sin and toward Him—is a central part of the gospel message. If we move away from the message of the gospel, we lose the power to save.

I know a group of wonderful Christians that meet for church in a nearby town. Their previous church had a large, historic impact, but the parent denomination decided it was permissible, even for one of its leaders, to live in open sexual sin. The congregation did not agree, except for one lone elder who did. That elder maintained the church building and took control of all the church's assets. The senior pastor, most of the staff, and half the congregation had to leave and start a new church but years later, the joy and freedom of this new, fast-growing congregation are about as contagious and beautiful as I've ever seen. God is moving in their midst as they embrace the whole gospel and experience its power.

Truth Plus Love = Influence

If we walk in the delicate balance of truth plus love, we will be influential for the sake of the gospel. This could be one of the most important messages the church needs today.

Your church and denomination might emphasize truth over love or love over truth, but it is imperative to focus on both. Does your pastor preach more about repentance and holiness or about loving people in the community? That may give you a hint about which of these two areas your church may need to hear more about.

Because we all have megaphones through our social media (and through our personal relationships), it is vital that Christians are taught to be led and controlled by the Holy Spirit, not by the flesh. It is important that we represent Jesus well to a watching world.

The Fruit of the Spirit = Influence

Along with truth and love, Christ wants to work other key traits in us: the “fruit of the Spirit.” In Galatians 5:22–23, Paul tells us, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (ESV).

Those fruits are not just the flannel-board cutouts we learned about in Sunday school. They are powerful life traits that have the potential to transform every aspect of our lives and make us influential and effective everywhere we go. God doesn’t only want to save our soul, He wants to move every area of our life onto the path of godly wisdom. He wants to transform our character and our inner life to be like His Son’s.

Think about it, have you ever met a person with a whole lot of love? A whole lot of joy? A whole lot of peace? A whole lot of kindness and gentleness? Who wouldn’t want to be around someone who exhibits these traits—these fruits produced by

the Holy Spirit in the character of the Christian? Who doesn't want to be friends with a person like that? I've never met an encourager without any friends. These are the kind of traits God wants to produce in us as we follow Him, and these are the exact kind of traits that can help us live effective and purposeful lives in the world, as well as giving us extraordinary influence to tell more people about Christ. The fruit of the Spirit in your own life is what helps you be fruitful in the world.

I firmly believe that if we grow in the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—we will be more influential in our homes, our workplaces, our communities, and our world, for the sake of the gospel.

Emotional Intelligence

Over the past few decades, studies have been done and books have been written about what is called Emotional Intelligence. Essentially, researchers studied graduates of Ivy League schools, all of whom had high IQs, but it was their *emotional* intelligence—their EQ—that proved to be the secret of their success.¹ Emotional Intelligence involves how we relate to others and our ability to process the circumstances in life and maintain a healthy perspective, our ability to overcome hardships, and more.

Ironically, this sounds a lot like the fruit of the Spirit. Not to compare apples to apples (no pun intended), but the business world is finally discovering what those who have read the Bible have known for two thousand years!

Things Love to Grow

A few years ago, my cousin Ben and his wife, Sarah, decided to pursue their dream by establishing an internship with an organic farmer in hopes of starting their own farm someday. Eventually they offered crop shares to small groups of people across the Twin Cities. Michelle and I were delighted to sign up.

Every two weeks when they dropped off our fresh vegetables, they would give us a small newsletter describing the contents of each box, along with suggested recipes. In some of them, they included an update from their farm. My favorite story was one that their farm-mentor taught them as they were training to run their own farm. In their first year, they often found themselves nervous about whether they would have enough vegetables for the hundred plus families that had signed up for the crop share. When they got a late start on the season and felt the pressure of being behind in their planting, they would remind themselves of what their farmer-mentor had taught them: “Things love to grow.” And sure enough, when the next crop share would roll around, there were always enough vegetables—even more than enough—because green things love to grow.

This is a picture for our lives. When we are connected to Christ, connected to His Word, connected to the local church, the fruit of the Spirit will grow naturally in our lives. Yes, we can work to cultivate them. Yes, we should pursue them. But in His powerful and mysterious way, when we connect to and trust Christ, God will grow the fruit of the Spirit in our lives ... because “things love to grow.”

So, while we’ve lost much of the influence God has intended for His people, the good news is that we know the way

back—through truth plus love. Along the way we also need to grow in the fruit of the Spirit, of which love is the beginning and the cornerstone.

But First, Answering Objections

Before we dive into what truth plus love looks like in the real world, let me answer a few of the most common objections—excuses, really—that people raise:

Excuse 1: We don't need to be gracious when we present the gospel. All we need is to tell the truth.

The Bible makes it clear that God calls His people to reflect His character, and that love, humility and gentleness do matter. It tells us to share the truth of God's Word "with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15) and to "do everything in love" (1 Corinthians 16:14). The Bible says that without love, we will simply be a clanging cymbal (or annoying noise) rendering our Christian lives ineffective.

Excuse 2: Telling people the truth is a loving thing to do. When we speak the truth, we are automatically being loving.

The Bible speaks about truth and love as two distinct, separate traits and tells us we need to walk in both. Yes, we can have others' best interests in mind when we tell them the truth and warn them from harm, but we are still called to do it in a way that is clearly loving and helps them sense that we have their best interests in mind. By contrast, it is completely possible to tell people the truth and turn them away from God by our lack of love.

Excuse 3: What about being prophetic? What about the Old Testament prophets? And what about Jesus overturning tables in the temple?

Some people look at the edginess of the Old Testament prophets and use that as an excuse to speak truth harshly. But we are called to follow and imitate Jesus (see Matthew 4:19; Ephesians 5:1), not the Old Testament prophets.

Jesus did overturn tables once, but we know He was without sin, so His anger was righteous. Even righteous anger was a rarity for Jesus. The overarching tone of His life was both profound love and biblical truth. People were drawn to Jesus everywhere He went, because He exuded love and taught truth. There may be times when we feel righteous anger, but we need to be careful to walk in both truth and love.

Some of you might lean toward being more prophetic and intense. If this is the case, you may need to work especially hard at what the Bible clearly calls us to do—to walk in both truth and love.

Excuse 4: We're not supposed to "try" to be loving. Love is a fruit of the Spirit, a gift from God, not something we can work at possessing.

The Bible does say that love, joy, peace, kindness, and gentleness are fruits of the Spirit—God's working in us by His Spirit. But the Bible also plainly tells us over and over to pursue these things. Consider that evangelism is a work of the Spirit, but the Bible still calls us to share the gospel. True holiness is Christ saving us and working in us to follow Him, but the Bible still calls us to pursue holiness. We have a part, and God has a part.²

Excuse 5: Christians need to stand together and speak the truth loudly to our culture.

It's good for Christians to come together in unity and proclaim the gospel of God's saving grace for struggling sinners. But we must remember 1 Corinthians 13—if we just speak loudly but don't walk in love, we are only a “clanging cymbal” or an annoying noise to our culture. We need both truth and love. We need to love loudly as well.

Excuse 6: The gospel is about grace, so it's not our business to speak truth or tell people not to sin.

The call to turn away from our sinfulness is a core part of the gospel message in several ways: our sin made it necessary for Jesus to give his life on the cross, in order to bridge our separation from God and bring us back into communion with God. Also, the Bible is clear that when we put our faith in Christ, God calls us to repent and turn from our sin. No Christian will ever be perfect in this life, but as we learn to follow Jesus, spiritual growth should occur. Even though we will never be perfect, the Bible warns strongly against giving “license to sin” (or telling people they are okay to live in sinful habits). Jesus came to save us from our sin, not make us feel comfortable with it.

We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, but the Bible is clear that true faith results in a lifelong desire to follow Christ and walk away from sin. Because we've experienced nearness to God, we found something better than living in the pigsty of sin. There is a difference between stumbling as we follow Jesus and living comfortably in sinful ways. The core of the gospel message includes the themes of both love and grace, repentance and truth.

Excuse 7: I'm not naturally loving, peaceful, kind, or gentle, so why should I change?

The call of Jesus is a call to “die daily”—to lay down our lives, pick up our cross, and “put on” Christ. We are called to allow Jesus to live his life in and through us. It’s not that he wants to change our personality so much as it’s that he wants to build in us true character.

Romans 12:6–8 tells us,

In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly. (NLT)

And if you don’t know how God has gifted you, ask the other believers in your life.

God has gifted us all in different ways. He has given us different levels of faith and different graces to serve His kingdom. Our life circumstances, how we were raised, and the experiences we’ve gone through may shape or hinder our natural bent toward being loving, joyful, or peaceful. But that doesn’t mean we are off the hook. The Bible makes it clear that the fruit of the Spirit is God’s consistent goal for every Christian. We won’t all have the same level of ease at being loving, joyful, peaceful, or kind, but we are still called by God to work toward them.

The Pressure Makes the Diamond

They say the pressure makes the diamond. And the more pressure, the better. Scripture tells us God's power is perfected in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). I've experienced more than my fair share of pressure, and I've been a witness to too much harshness, vitriol, hate, and just plain evil from other people, including some self-professing Christians. I've experienced hundreds of harsh criticisms over the past seventeen years of doing ministry. Most of this has been from people who didn't know me well. I've had people attack my motives, say horrible things about me, and correct my theology harshly, without love or compassion.

I've experienced hurt, spiritual abuse, and disappointment from church leaders and mentors who focused too much on legalism and lacked an understanding of how to balance it with kindness, gentleness, and love. These leaders invested in my life spiritually but ultimately seemed more interested in building followers who were dependent on them, not raising up others to be leaders. One mentor, for example, after I served for years in his ministry, told me he could never see me as a friend, only as someone he once mentored. He always cloaked these kinds of hurtful statements in spiritual talk, saying all the right things, but ultimately leaving a trail of confused, abused, and hurt interns wherever he went. It's all too easy for us to cloak hurtful words in spiritual talk.

When I was younger and growing in my faith, some of the most passionate Christians I knew were also some of the most unloving and unkind. Don't get me wrong, I knew many loving Christians back then, but I noticed that the people who

acted the most passionate were often missing kindness and love. Take for instance a youth leader I knew: he was passionate about memorizing Scripture and sharing his faith, but he was abrasive, legalistic, and sometimes downright mean toward students he didn't think were spiritual enough. Actually, scratch that, *no one* was spiritual enough to satisfy him. But I don't blame him only. There seemed to be an unspoken belief in our churches that God is looking for intense Christians, but really, He is looking for those who exhibit both truth and love.

There have been times when I have been too intense as well. As a young preacher, I sometimes held people to an unrealistic spiritual standard, coming across as aggressive and high-and-mighty. This is why I am now so passionate about this message of truth plus love. When I was younger, I was aiming at the wrong things, and now I find myself longing for God to produce true spiritual maturity in my life. I long to walk in the fruit of the Spirit toward my family, my friends, and those I cross paths with in my life. I long to find the balance between truth and love.

I have learned that over-intensity is false spiritual maturity. God's Word says, "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17). I have learned that no matter how passionate some Christians seem, or how spiritual they talk, there are subtle signposts that show whether true spiritual maturity is present ... things like whether they keep their word, if they own up to their mistakes and apologize, if they are focused on serving others, rather than desiring others to serve them, and if they are even-tempered, gentle, peaceful, considerate, full of mercy, and exhibit other fruits of

the Spirit. You can't fake those things for long. No one is perfect, but the Bible distinguishes between spiritual immaturity and spiritual maturity and teaches that we can take steps, with His strength and help, down the path toward maturity.

We have to be careful not to be fatalists. Even though we will always fall short and always need the gospel—it is wrong to assume we can never get better at following Jesus. The reason people assume things will never change is that spiritual growth is often painfully slow. But even though we are not yet who we want to be, we can thank God that we are nowhere near who we used to be! He is making all things new.

James reminds us, “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). Any Christian who denies having faults, imperfections, and struggles is contradicting the Word of God. I am far from perfect in these areas myself. But I can tell you as someone who was raised in the church, I simply did not understand the glory, beauty, and magnitude of these traits until recently. God has been opening my eyes. Here is where my heart is: I long to grow in these areas. I'm hungry for God to help me exhibit these fruit in my life!

My life experiences have led me up to this moment—to writing this book. It is my prayer that the burdens I've carried, the tears I've shed, the painful lessons I've learned, and the comfort and wisdom I've received from God's Word as I've walked through these painful trials will serve to flood your own heart with comfort, wisdom, and power from God.