

Jesus
doesn't
Care About
Your Messy
House

HE CARES ABOUT
YOUR HEART

DANA K. WHITE



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Jesus Doesn't Care About Your Messy House

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*To Jackson, Reid, and Presley. Thanks for
confirming that God's unique design is better
than anything I could dream up.*

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About That Title . . .

*J*esus doesn't care about your messy house. If that statement makes you feel weird, don't worry. I'm going to use the next sixty-thousand-ish words to explain, but I'll give you a few spoilers now.

This is a book about experiencing God's grace, using an oddly specific, strangely divisive example from my own life. This particular example feels both too unimportant and too daunting to be *the* example, but it's the example God gave me to share.

People tend to react to a book's title and assume they know what's inside. They read one paragraph or a single page and are convinced they "get it." If you're going to remember only one thing from this book, though, I want it to be this: *Jesus cares (deeply, desperately, passionately) about you.* If you've cried yourself to sleep over your messy house, He cares about those tears. If you've flushed with shame while making an excuse to a friend who asked to stop by, Jesus understands. If you've prayed, begging Him to change you and your home, He hears those prayers. He's in the process of answering them, right now.

Cleaning up a messy house is a good thing. I've spent over a

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decade working on mine and teaching others what I've learned. But if your goal is to get your home clean enough to please God, that's a problem. Your house can never be clean enough to please God, not because you can't scrub hard enough or get rid of enough clutter, but because He was never looking for a perfect house in the first place. Thinking a clean house is what Jesus wants from you, or that He's mad at you because your house is messy, means you are missing what He *does* care about.

Jesus doesn't want anything to take your focus away from Him. He doesn't want you to depend on or rest in anything other than Him. Even good things—like getting your house under control—can cause your heart to get off track, and Jesus cares very much about your heart. Your heart is the rudder or the steering wheel or whatever metaphorical device helps you understand that your heart is the core of *you*.

My messy house was once my deepest, darkest secret. The state of my home caused me intense shame. I dreamed that someday I'd get it organized, but many somedays came and went and an organized house didn't happen. I sorted and re-sorted and arranged and rearranged, but my home constantly fell back into Disaster Status. No matter how hard I scrubbed or how many bins, baskets, or buckets I purchased, I couldn't do it. I could not make the changes stick.

In 2009, after a desperate and angry prayer asking God why He hadn't cured me of the chronic messiness I'd begged Him to fix, I started a blog called *A Slob Comes Clean*. I was desperate to be a writer. I wanted to write to encourage women, but I didn't want to live in fear that someone might find out what my house looked like. *A Slob Comes Clean* was supposed to be my practice blog. I thought I'd journal there for a few months, and once my

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house was under control, I'd start another blog about things I felt qualified to share. I wasn't teaching anything. I was just figuring things out for myself.

Anonymously, of course. I wasn't *wacko*.

As I wrote, I analyzed what I was doing and not doing, what I was thinking and reasoning and failing to notice. I worked on one habit at a time, figuring out how to work the habits into my day and learning which ones made the biggest impact. I decluttered my way through cabinets and closets and felt lots of feelings as I purged boxes full of treasures and truckloads full of junk. My home improved, and I learned a lot about myself. I figured out why this type of thing (dishes, laundry, dining room tables that grow random piles of stuff) was difficult for me and how to solve these problems.

I was also surprised, though, by what did *not* happen. I assumed that at some point, God was finally going to reveal some big spiritual truth about my clutter or my messy kitchen. Isn't He a God of order? Isn't cleanliness next to godliness? I just knew there had to be a Bible verse or spiritual principle I was missing that would make all this homemaking stuff finally click for me.

But that is not what God showed me as I worked hard, thought hard, and prayed hard. Instead, God showed me that He made me. I'd known I was His creation since my preschool Sunday school class. What I didn't grasp until my thirties, though, was that He made me . . . me. Quirks and all. He purposefully gave me the ability to hyperfocus on one thing while I let a million other things slide for the sake of that one thing. God had a plan when He designed me with the ability to become obsessed with every little detail when directing a play but also

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with the ability to walk past a sink full of dirty dishes without even noticing them. *For several days in a row.*

These days, my sink is (usually) no longer piled with more than one day's worth of dishes. I have hauled truckloads of clutter out of my home. I almost never pretend I'm not home when the doorbell rings. I've discovered my Clutter Threshold, and I've calculated Dishes Math. I've written entire books on the subject of housekeeping, using made-up-by-me terms like Clutter Threshold and Dishes Math.

Through it all, God has shown me that my messiness issues are not spiritual issues. They're just my struggles, and having a struggle is part of who I am as a human and who you are as a human. People who *do* notice a sink full of dirty dishes struggle with something else. Every person reading this book struggles with something.

I'm fairly sure God hasn't called most of you to make careers out of exposing your deepest, darkest secrets, but I am absolutely confident He wants you to let your struggle draw you closer to Him. He wants to use your unique struggle to show you how and why He made you the way He did. Your struggle can help you understand God more, and knowing God more is a beautiful thing. Knowing Him more brings so much gratitude into my heart that it (almost) makes me thankful for my struggle. If the choice is between having a perfect house or knowing God, I choose God. It's about Him, not about the struggle. God used my struggle to move me from head knowledge to deep-hearted understanding of many aspects of my relationship with Him. I pray this book will help you understand some of these things in less time than it took me.

Part 1

Cleanliness Is Not a Spiritual Issue

Chapter 1

Jesus Cares About Your Messy House If You Do

Jesus cares about your messy house if *you* care about your messy house. If your heart hurts because your guestroom is filled with boxes and you had to make up an excuse so your mother-in-law would stay in a hotel, He cares. If you're bewildered by never-ending piles of laundry that you could've handled easily in an earlier phase of life, He sees the tears that threaten to spill. If you're desperate for adult conversation but have to cancel your playdate when it rains because you're too embarrassed to let your friend inside your house, Jesus' heart aches for your heartache.

Jesus sees your pain, whatever struggle is causing it. The purpose of that pain, of that struggle, is to draw your heart in line with His heart. I wanted a spiritual cure for my ongoing messiness problem. Instead, what I got was a better understanding of who I am and who Jesus is and how He designed me to fit into a relationship with Him.

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I'm passionate about this message and the potentially disconcerting book title because as I read through the words and life of Jesus, I see how absolutely crucial it is to stop turning things that aren't spiritual issues into spiritual issues. Having clutter is not a spiritual failure. There are reasons why clutter happens more often and in greater measure for some of us than others. Understanding those reasons helps. There can be a spiritual factor, but it is not a spiritual failure.

An ongoing struggle that feels unsolvable is all-consuming. The angst, frustration, and constancy of the struggle keep it at the top of the list of problems to beg God to solve. As I walked through my deslobification journey, God shifted something in my heart that changed my prayers. He showed me that He wanted me to give Him my struggle. Instead of begging Him to change me, He wanted me to give Him all of me. God wants you to give Him your struggle. He doesn't want you to try to hide your struggle from Him, even if you've gotten really good at keeping it secret from everyone else. He wants you to give Him the struggle you've never considered He might want: the one you're confident He could never use. He wants you to be willing to let Him do *whatever* He wants to do with that struggle, even if that means *not* taking it away.

Jesus cares deeply about your heart. Effort pleases God only if it comes out of a heart that loves Him and desires to know Him more. Knowing God more means understanding that effort isn't what makes Him love you.

Stop focusing on things that *don't* matter as if they are things that *do* matter.

Your weakness, your struggle, your pain, whatever it is, helps you understand that you need God. Believing this can be hard, but your weakness is a gift.

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This Book Is for You . . . No Matter Why You Are Here

If you'd asked me fifteen years ago to name the very last subject I'd ever write a book about, I immediately would have said, "Housekeeping."

If you'd told me I would one day write a book about housekeeping *as it relates to my relationship with Jesus*, I would have definitely envisioned a much different book from the one you're reading now. I'd have assumed a book about Jesus + housekeeping would include a list of Bible verses that would remove all my bewilderment over the state of my home. I'd read a verse, say, "Oooohhhh, that's what I've been doing wrong! Thanks, Jesus!" and my bathtubs would sparkle from that moment forward.

This book is definitely not a how-to guide on getting your house under control. I've already written those. In the opening section of my first book, *How to Manage Your Home Without Losing Your Mind*, I was pretty blunt. Like, DO NOT READ THIS BOOK if you don't struggle (big-time) to keep your house out of Disaster Status. When I wrote *Decluttering at the Speed of Life*, I knew decluttering was a more universal topic. Everyone everywhere has to get rid of stuff. I made it super clear, though, that I wouldn't be sharing how to make things pretty or perfect. I was there to teach you how to dig your way out of your stuff.

This book is different.

This book is for you if you felt relieved at the title because you immediately understood what it meant—you know all too well the weight of worrying what Jesus thinks about your house. You know your house isn't Jesus' measuring stick, but you've never put that thought into words. I've got words for you. Lots and lots of words.

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This book is for you if the title made you mad because you've spent years working on your home and it's the one thing you've got down. You have other problems you worry might make Jesus mad, but your house isn't one of them. You focus on your house when you need to make yourself feel better. Housekeeping is the task you tackle in order to squash your panic over the other things you can't figure out how to change.

This book is for you if the title made you feel uneasy because you've tried to help someone who couldn't seem to "get" how to keep their home from becoming a disaster. You couldn't get why they couldn't get it. *Them not getting it plus you not getting why* hurt your relationship. Maybe you put a spiritual spin on your advice and implied that Jesus cared very much about their messy house.

This book is for you if you reacted to the title by immediately and completely disagreeing with it. Don't worry. There's a lot to dive into here, so you'll have more chances to decide if you agree or you'll walk away feeling more confident in your disagreement.

This book is for you if you have worked and worked on your home and don't like the title because you've been trying to do what is right. You believe your efforts matter. They *do* matter. They matter so much that I've written three entire books about how to get a home under control.

This book is for you if your response to the title is, "Well, of course He doesn't!" Thanks for the affirmation, and I hope you appreciate the gift you have in your understanding. I hope this book deepens your confidence and gives you words to share with those in your life who need your encouragement.

This book is for you if you're feeling hopeful, scared, or both when it comes to the state of your house. This book is for you if you've spent many weekends (or Christmas vacations)

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top-to-bottom cleaning, only to be surprised by the reappearance of disaster on Tuesday morning (or on January 2). This book is for you if you can't count the number of times you've declared that things in your house are finally going to change—but that change never sticks.

Most of all, though, this book is for My People, the ones who have already read everything I've ever written and may or may not care if Jesus cares about any of it. Welcome to my long-winded explanation of where Jesus fits into the subject of cleaning because, if you already know me, you know He's part of everything in my life.

So What's the Link Between Cleaning and Jesus?

When I wrote my first two books, I was adamant they not include spiritual content. I was adamant because so many people who love Jesus have written about cleaning, organizing, and home management from a spiritual perspective, and even if they didn't mean to imply that having an orderly home was what Jesus requires of Christians Christian women, a lot of people reading their words felt that way.

I'm going to make two seemingly contradictory statements here: Cleaning is not a spiritual issue. Everything is a spiritual issue.

Everything is a spiritual issue because God cares about every single aspect of our lives. Not because He expects us to be amazing at every single aspect of our lives but because He wants us to give Him our hearts. And that includes giving Him every single aspect of our lives.

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I've heard people talk about how they had to learn that God loved them even when their homes weren't perfect. He showed them the futility of striving for His approval by scrubbing their grout or dusting behind the fridge. He wasn't disappointed in them because their houses weren't shiny and straight at all times. They're right, and their messages are important.

This time, though, the same message is for a different audience, from a very different angle. I know from personal experience that a whole segment of the population, both Christian and non-Christian, can't relate to the way that message is usually shared. Our problem is not that we can't stop cleaning but that we are too overwhelmed to start. People Like Me are frustrated and bewildered over something that seems like it should be easy but instead is incredibly hard for us.

Some of us used to be organized, but life changes (kids, aging parents, stressful jobs) mean the ways we used to handle our homes don't work anymore. Some of us have ADHD; some of us have chronic health problems; some of us have trauma. Many of us have always struggled without any idea why we struggle. Most of us have more ideas about interesting things to do than we have space to put the stuff in that we think we need to do those things. We can't relate to someone who is relieved to learn it's okay to leave the dishes undone instead of staying up until two A.M. deep-cleaning the kitchen out of fear of God's disapproval. We're glad for the mom who realizes it's okay to let the neighbor come inside before putting the kids' toys back in their toy box, but the example makes us feel worse, not better.

People Like Me have three toy boxes, they're all overflowing, and the floor is *still* covered in toys. We've already found two more toy boxes on Facebook Marketplace and have arranged a

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pickup for one of them. And that still won't be enough to get all the toys off the floor. We never even think about cleaning the kitchen until someone texts to say they are coming over and we realize we haven't washed a dish in three days. The thought of letting people into our homes without a two-week warning causes actual heart palpitations.

This book is for the person who hears about someone who needs to loosen her grip on perfection and thinks, *I'd love to have that problem*. I write for the person who can't even get a grip on her house, who feels like she's sinking in quicksand, who has absolutely no idea how the mess keeps reappearing. I've been there, and I'm here for you. I *am* you. I'm the person who tried for years and could not figure out how to have a house that wasn't a disaster. I believed I was defective, flawed, and inept. My problem wasn't that I couldn't let go of perfection but that I felt inherently incapable of handling my house at all.

But God.

God showed me that the way I'm wired is beautiful to Him. How my brain works is exactly how He wants it to work. His plan, all along, was for me to help others whose brains work exactly the way He designed their brains to work.

I'm not a theologian and promise not to pretend to be one in this book. I am, however, a woman whose heart and mind and life have been changed by studying the Bible. Not coincidentally at all, I started truly studying the Bible less than a year before starting what I refer to as my "deslobification" process. Over the same period of growing spiritually in confidence and understanding, I went from pretending not to be home when the doorbell rang to usually being the first to offer my home when a need arises.

Feel free to question what you read in this book, but look for

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answers in the Bible. Go read the passages I cite. Read the verses (and whole chapters) before them and after them, and pray. Ask God to help you see and understand His Word, even if it feels weird to ask. I promise you, it's His very favorite question, and one He promises to answer.

I'm not going to ask you to agree wholeheartedly with everything in this book, but I am asking you to consider. Some of my incorrect assumptions about God came from being taught incorrect or incomplete things. Most, though, were due to the filter of shame through which I'd heard truth. I will understand more in another fifteen years if I keep studying Scripture, but what I know now has great value and is important to share.

Ultimately, this is a book about my own spiritual growth, which happened to coincide with my growing understanding of how to keep a house under control. Learning more about myself while learning more about God brought so much into focus. My weaknesses and failures are opportunities to better understand God's grace.

I'm willing (finally) to call myself a Decluttering Expert, but I always try to be clear that I teach strategies I know work because I've lived them. That's my promise in this book too. I know these spiritual truths to be true because I've lived them.

Supremely Unqualified

I am uniquely qualified to write this specific book. I understand the struggle of being chronically disorganized. I've been bewildered by the shame. I've led many thousands of women through real change in this specific area. It's a weird thing to be a

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published author (something I'm very excited to be) whose book titles give people completely wrong impressions about what you do for a living. Logic would say that someone who writes about such things must be super organized. But God doesn't worry about logical sense, and He likes to use my life as an example.

Here's my backstory for those of you who don't know me. For those who do, it's a refresher. I grew up messy. Much to my mother's dismay and despite her creative attempts at instruction, discipline, and endless failed reward systems, I was hopelessly messy. I didn't like being that way. I hated being late because I had been searching for a lost shoe in piles of random stuff. But I didn't *worry* about it. I had a go-getter personality and felt competent at most things I cared to try. If I didn't care about something, I didn't worry about not being great at it. I'm not an overachiever for the sake of overachieving.

I like to impress teenagers with the fact that I played varsity basketball as a freshman in high school, but the full story is significantly less impressive.

I was a cheerleader in junior high and high school. I cared about being a cheerleader. As a little girl, I had a *book* about cheerleading and learned every stretch, cheer, and chant in that book. When my brother played YMCA basketball and football, my dad was his coach. This let me go legit in my cheer aspirations. I recruited friends, designed T-shirts (a much bigger deal in the '80s than it is now), and required my T-shirted friends to attend practices. (I was the cheer coach, of course.) We cheered from the sidelines and took to the field at halftime. I look back now in wonder that I felt so free to do all of that as an eight-year-old, but it was the most natural and logical thing in the world to me at the time.

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Only after I'd been organizing my own squad for three or four years (when I was, at most, in the third grade) did our local Y get the idea to form cheerleading squads for the elementary-age football teams. I clearly remember my mother (whose support, I assume, was my enablement) informing the woman at the Y's front desk that my brother's team already had a squad and wouldn't need one provided. Once I became a "real" cheerleader in seventh grade, cheering was my entire life for several years.

I bring all that up to make the point that I was a tackler. Not football tackling, but goal tackling. I see the thing I want to do, learn how to do it, and then do it well.

My experience playing basketball was . . . different. I went to a tiny school, and when I was a freshman, the girls' basketball coach stuck his head into cheerleading practice to ask if any of us would like to be on the basketball team. If they couldn't find a few more players, they couldn't have a team.

I thought basketball sounded, like, totally fun. I was no Air Bud, but I could be a warm body on the team. The first day was a blast. Basketball was new for most of us. *I like trying new things.* We dribbled, shot, and did whatever else basketball players do. A few of the girls were naturals. The rest of us, not so much. I wasn't worried. I was having fun.

Soon, though, the newness wore off. It was no longer a quirky hoot to attempt a bounce pass. I noticed that while everyone else improved with each day and each drill, I didn't. After a week (and then two weeks), I was just as bad at basketball as I'd been when we started, and a whole lot worse than those who'd started with me.

The coach tried to help me. He was kind, but methods that worked for everyone else failed with me. One day, he said we

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could leave practice as soon as we made ten free throws. When I was the only player left in the gym, the coach moved me off the free throw line, closer to the basket. He changed the requirement from ten baskets to three. He moved me closer again, until I was almost directly below the hoop. Finally, he told me if I could make *one* basket, from *anywhere*, I could go home.

I didn't enjoy being terrible at basketball, but I didn't worry about it. I was able to laugh when the coach said to the team (in the middle of a game he had to put me in because everyone else was hurt), "If you have to pass it to Dana, it's okay." I took my basketball photo holding the water bottle. That felt appropriate.

Why bring up basketball in a book about cleaning? I didn't stress over my utter failure. I felt no angst over my inability to figure out something that others seemed to learn effortlessly. Playing basketball wasn't my identity. For most of my life, my failed attempts at "getting organized" didn't freak me out either, because my living space wasn't my identity. I was confident the reason my spaces were disastrous-without-exception was that my focus and energy were spent on other things. One day, when it mattered to me, I was sure I would kick cleaning's butt.

I collected magazine pages and printed internet articles (stored in boxes in the garage or maybe the attic) for the magical day when I'd become a stay-at-home mom and my home would finally be a haven. I planned to create a place of rest and beauty and streamlined efficiency for my family. I'd figure it out just like I had figured out other stuff.

That didn't happen. When I ended up at the point in my life where I thought I'd settle easily into a rhythm of neatness, I felt blindsided by reality. The opposite of a magical transformation happened. Instead of "having nothing to do but clean, cook, and

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decorate,” my house was worse than ever because I was in it all day long with babies who made my previous strategy of marathon catch-up sessions impossible. I was bewildered. I’d never liked my messy spaces, but I’d always assumed they wouldn’t be messy once I cared enough. I finally cared enough, but caring enough wasn’t enough.

I grew a little panicked, and then a lot panicked, because I could no longer deny something was wrong. The thing that seemed so simple for everyone else was impossible for me. I’d do a little better for a little while, fail, and then come up with a new way to try. Every time another of my super logical, totally-should-work plans failed, I lost a little more hope. I’d always wanted to be a mom, and I was living my life’s dream, but attached to the identity of being a mom was a home. Right or wrong, the state of my home felt like my job review or my report card, and I was failing.

The Extra Layers of the Struggle for Women

I write for women not because I’m under the delusion that men don’t struggle the way I did, and not because I think it’s a woman’s job to keep the dishes done and the clothes clean; I speak to women because I speak from my own experience, and I’m a woman.

As a woman, I understand that, right or wrong, brought about by creative design or social constructs, many of us who feel bewildered and inept at keeping our homes from being total disasters feel like there’s something wrong with us *as women*. There’s an assumption that women should be able to create

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comfortable homes. We think we're supposed to have the "woman's touch" that a bachelor pad lacks.

In social situations, it's usually women who default to talking about cleaning the way farmers default to talking about the weather.

"I just can't understand how anyone can sleep knowing there are dirty dishes sitting in the sink."

"How in the world does he not see that his socks landed on the floor when the laundry hamper is, like, *literally* eighteen inches away?!?"

"Who does that? Who just takes off their shoes in the middle of the room, trips over them an hour later, *doesn't* pick them up and put them away, and then trips over them again? And *still* doesn't put them away? I mean, what is wrong with him?"

It's pretty standard schtick between women. They don't always say it outright, but the underlying message is: He is dumb or clueless or hopeless. Good thing he has a woman around to make up for his stupidity.

But what if you relate more to the man who's being bashed than the woman doing the bashing?

And what if you hear this (which I have): "It's a good thing he brings home a paycheck because I don't even know if I'd need him around otherwise"? Self-worth plummets. I didn't bring home a paycheck when my home and my bewilderment were at their worst. Maybe you bring home a paycheck but you still feel pressure to be naturally good at all things home-related.

When little boys coo to a baby doll or little girls play with toy hammers, we celebrate that they aren't bound by the constructs of gender role expectations. Yet many women who feel competent in all sorts of high-pressure situations can be brought to

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tears by their endlessly messy kitchens. The information I share is for men to use as well. A dishwashing routine doesn't care if you can grow a beard. But the emotional component is not to be denied in this particular struggle, and based on my own experience and the heart-wrenching stories that arrive in my email inbox on a daily basis, it's primarily women who let this struggle affect their identity and sense of self-worth. That's why I write (mainly) for women.

My hope and prayer is that what God has shown me through His Word will change you too. (Not change you, like, make you not messy anymore, but change your heart and change how you see yourself.) I pray the words in this book will help you understand who God is and who you are and how much He loves you exactly the way He made you.