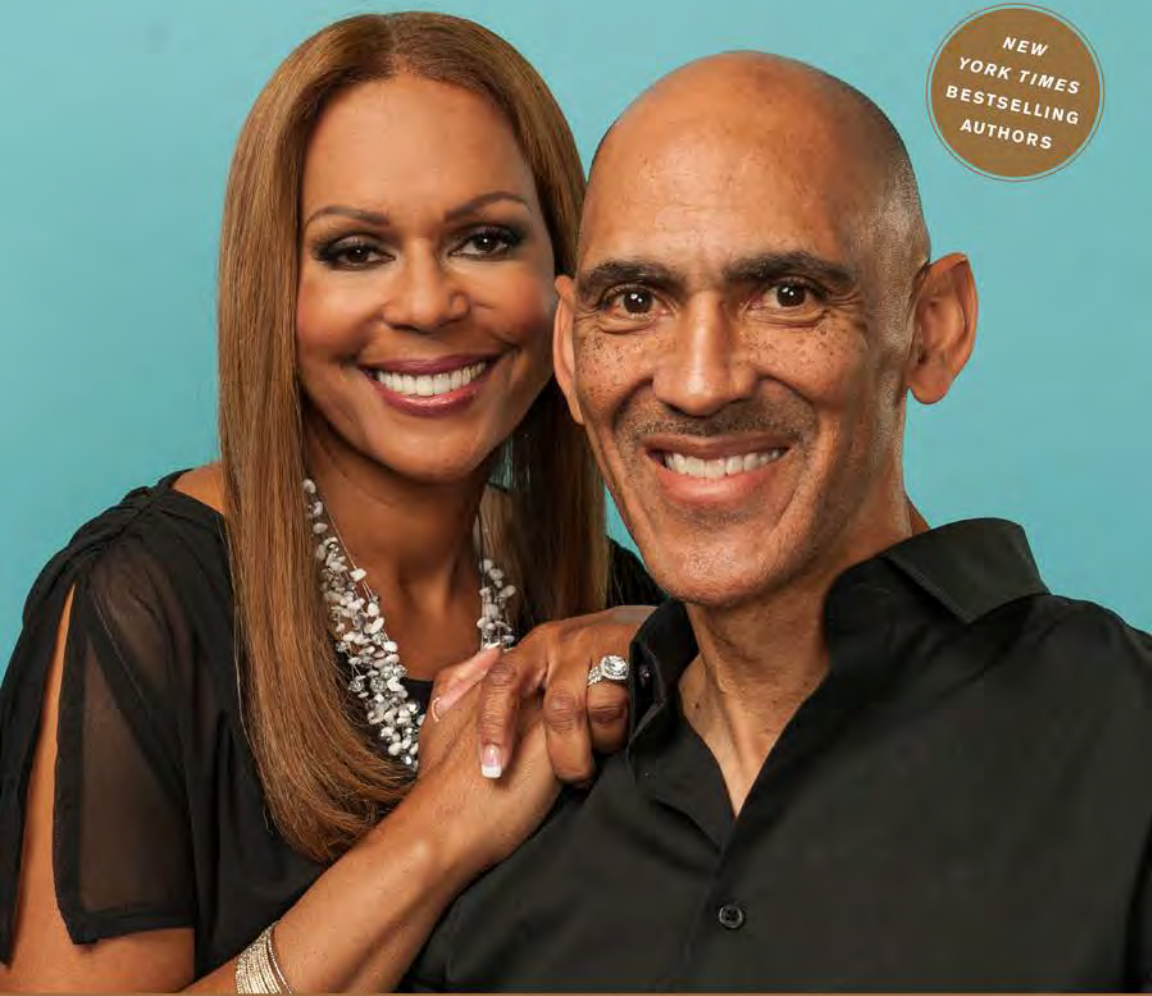


LAUREN & TONY DUNGY

foreword by Santiago "Jimmy" Mellado, president and CEO of Compassion International

NEW
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AUTHORS



UNCOMMON

SAYING YES TO A PURPOSEFUL LIFE

INFLUENCE

PRAISE FOR LAUREN AND TONY DUNGY'S BOOKS

“With a ‘he said/she said’ format, former NFL coach Dungy (*Quiet Strength*) and his wife, Lauren, share lessons learned over more than thirty years of marriage. They are different in personality, but their deep faith and commitment to their relationship help them grow closer through career changes, multiple moves, the rearing of nine children, and family tragedy. They discuss the wide variety of incidents and factors that have strengthened their marriage, like working through different communication styles and learning the importance of praying together. They also share the difficulties through which they have walked together, like being in the public eye—Tony became the first African-American head coach to guide a team to the Super Bowl—dealing with the loss of a parent; and coping with the suicide of their son. They offer their thoughts in personal, conversational style with the hope that readers can recognize some part of their own marriage and be able to find guidance, hope, and encouragement. The book reads more like an enjoyable chat with longtime friends than the helpful marriage guidebook that it is.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *Uncommon Marriage*

“Tony Dungy’s life is a living testimony of a man’s faith in God. He has given us a new picture and definition of a Coach. Good guys do come in first!”

LOVIE SMITH, head coach of the Houston Texans

“In this fast-paced American culture with so many people driven by the lure of material success, Tony Dungy reminds us what truly matters in the game of life. At the pinnacle of NFL success, he has taken time to show us the value of making memories and not just money, focusing on family instead of fame, and building up a storehouse of eternal wealth that can never be depleted. Don’t just read this book; ‘listen’ to it with the ears of your soul.”

PRISCILLA SHIRER, author and speaker, on *Quiet Strength*

“In today’s world, where sports figures and movie stars are idolized, Tony Dungy is a true hero because his life is a testimony to the fact that if you ‘do your best and let God do the rest,’ not only will success follow, but your life will have a positive impact on others. This is the reason I consider Tony a great friend and role model.”

BENJAMIN S. CARSON SR., MD, former professor and director of pediatric neurosurgery, Johns Hopkins Medical Institutes

“My good friend Tony Dungy has demonstrated in his personal life and in this powerful book that it is possible to be a committed Christian on and off the field and still come out a winner. This insightful work will challenge, encourage, and inspire all who read it to uncompromisingly integrate our faith into every aspect of our lives, so that we, too, will be victorious in spite of the challenges and obstacles that life brings our way.”

TONY EVANS, senior pastor, Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship; president, The Urban Alternative, on *Quiet Strength*

“Amid the deafening roar surrounding the machinery of earthly glory, the spiritual man leaves quiet footsteps of inspired faith. Tony Dungy’s footprints can be traced back to God and family. This foundation has provided him with the love, strength,

compassion, and tolerance to fill his earthly run with man's greatest gift and purpose . . . to be of service to God and his fellow man."

JIM IRSAY, owner of the Indianapolis Colts

"In the twenty-one years that I've known Tony Dungy, I have consistently found him to be a man of integrity, sincerity, and openness. As a man of faith, no matter what trials or tribulations he's faced, he has embodied the Scripture found in Proverbs 16:32: 'He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city.' Dungy has followed the biblical prescription for success. In football and in the game of life, Tony Dungy is a winner."

JAMES BROWN, host of *The NFL Today* on CBS Sports

"Tony Dungy is a world champion in every way. His quiet strength both on and off the field has been an inspiration to millions. His sense of priority is uncommon and uncompromised. His purposeful desire to turn the spotlight off himself and on to Christ is admirable. Even more impressive, however, is the character and dignity he exemplifies when there are no cameras . . . when there is no spotlight. This is a man of tremendous faith, and he lives it every day of his life. He has inspired me, and I'm so thankful for his friendship."

MICHAEL W. SMITH, vocalist and songwriter

"For over a decade, Tony Dungy has quietly taught me significant lessons in leadership and in life. Now he's sharing them with you in this thought-provoking book. In *Quiet Strength*, Tony leads us on a journey that reveals profound principles for living and our ultimate purpose in life."

MARK W. MERRILL, president, Family First and All Pro Dad

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*For Lauren's late mother, Doris J. "Bird" Harris.
Her unselfish love and commitment to Kingdom-building
provided a beautiful model for us to follow.*

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FOREWORD

As a kid, one of my heroes was the late Tom Landry, legendary head coach of the Dallas Cowboys football team from 1960 to 1988. He led his team to two Super Bowl victories during his time in Dallas and coached his teams to twenty consecutive winning seasons—a staggering record that stands to this day. I grew up in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Coach Landry was setting records and leaving his mark, and I remember the impression that was left on me as I watched him work while living out his faith through it all. I wasn't watching him from a neighboring community or a residence a few states away; I was watching him from my childhood homes in Managua, Nicaragua, and later, Panama City, Panama. And while my genetic makeup meant I'd never play in the NFL, I suspected that if I could apply the same discipline, balance, character, and faithfulness to Jesus to my efforts that it seemed Coach Landry applied to his, perhaps I could be a force for good in life like he was. I so admired him that I wrote him a letter when I was in the sixth grade and was shocked when I received a personally signed response. I cherished that piece of paper for years and have kept it to this day.

I never had the privilege of meeting Tom Landry in person, but to this day I consider him an early mentor of mine. He shaped my thinking and my priorities during that pivotal period in every adolescent's life—when a child is figuring out what kind of adult to be.

Around the same time that I was making my way to the States to attend college at Southern Methodist University—on scholarship for track and field, as it would turn out—a man named Tony Dungy was beginning his coaching career, working first with his alma mater, the University of Minnesota, and eventually with the Pittsburgh Steelers, where he'd played for two years. Not long after I graduated from college, Tony made sports headlines by being named the youngest defensive coordinator in the league. He'd go on to coach the Kansas City Chiefs and the Minnesota Vikings before becoming a head coach—first with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and then, of course, with the Indianapolis Colts, where he'd net a Super Bowl win. From time to time, I'd catch media interviews with Tony, and whenever I heard him speak, I'd think about how familiar his approach sounded to me. I'd later learn that Coach Landry had been a hero of Tony's, too, and that according to Tony the reason he'd succeeded in the sport was because of those Landry-esque principles we'd both esteemed.

Discipline.

Life balance.

Character.

Faithfulness to Jesus.

In 2010 I was thrilled to meet Tony in person, after he accepted my invitation to speak at a conference for pastors and leaders I helped organize each year. By then I'd begun watching

him carefully: How did he handle victory? How did he handle defeat? How did he handle personal adversity? Over time, would the pressures of coaching make him snap or change him in a bad way? What I discovered filled me with respect and admiration.

Through the inevitable ups and downs of life, it seemed nothing could take him off course. Tony Dungy really was *that* consistently measured, *that* committed to living a life of integrity, *that* energized by serving others, and *that* encouraging of everyone he met. It was obvious that he valued helping young athletes navigate the challenges of early stardom. And that he enjoyed speaking into the lives of other coaches, of other dads, of people who were incarcerated, of anyone God put in his path. And that he longed to learn more and more about his faith. And that he was committed to getting sharper, more skilled, himself.

These things all remain true of Tony today. But while he might give the NFL's finest—Coach Landry, of course, but also Tony's beloved first boss, Coach Chuck Noll—credit for envisioning him in his role as a football coach, he'd tell you that the person who first inspired him to live beyond himself in any kind of fully orbed way was his wise and winsome wife, Lauren. It was on the day when she said, "Tony, I think we should adopt."

. . .

For the thirty-nine years of their marriage, Lauren and Tony Dungy have operated as a dream team, working relentlessly on behalf of those who are marginalized, oppressed, and caught in the crosshairs of others' poor choices. As someone who grew up in less-than-lavish circumstances and who now fights daily to

release children from poverty in Jesus' name, I am never more impressed than when I see people of status and means choose *joyfully* to invest themselves in lifting others up. Early on, Lauren and Tony traded the goals of fame, fortune, and the world's flawed definition of success for the goals of inspiring those who were downcast by including them and loving them well. This life strategy is what led them to become pillars in their community, to be seen as a crucial part of their local church, and to reflect the love of Jesus to so many adopted children.

What a win for those precious children.

What a win for Lauren and Tony.

What a win for us *all*. Goodness begets goodness. Our world could use a bit more goodness, I think.

To the casual observer, it may seem as though Lauren and Tony are just “that type of people,” the type that is magically wired from birth to be helpful and kind. But this couldn't be further from the truth. The Dungys' style of living was born of thoughtfulness, commitment, and faith. They didn't stumble into significance; they *fought* their way to this aim. And with this book, we get an inside look at how that unfolded and an opportunity to learn from their example of how to become the goodness we need.

Several years ago, I came across a stat in a book I was reading that said a full *95 percent* of our behaviors as human beings are dictated by the inertia of what we've done in the past—the habits we've formed over time.¹ Ninety-five percent! Far less of our lives is driven by individual, thoughtfully processed

¹The book I was reading was David and Caron Loveless's *Nothing to Prove* (CreateSpace, 2016), and the Lovelesses were citing the work of Dr. Roy Baumeister, who wrote on the topic both in the 1998 edition of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and in the book he coauthored with John Tierney titled, *Willpower: Why Self-Control Is the Secret to Success* (Penguin Books, 2011).

choices than I wanted to believe. The rhythms of life that we choose turn into patterns and habits that have incredible consequences—for good or bad.

I kept thinking about that stat as I read an early copy of Lauren and Tony's book, which is when this thought occurred to me: if I focus today's attention on choosing wisely and do the same tomorrow and the day after that, eventually the habit that will inform my behavior will be a good habit—a habit that helps me move toward a good life instead of one that threatens to take me and others down.

Lauren and Tony knew their own hearts well enough to know that if they relied solely on willpower in the moment, they'd never live the life they were called to live. Sure, at any given crossroads they'd *want* to do the right thing. But like you and me and every other person alive, their actions would eventually fail to live up to their noble desires, and the chasm between the two would grow. To solve this problem, they decided to practice the things that mattered most to them so positive habits would start to form life-giving patterns. They searched the Scriptures. They had countless conversations with each other. They invited input from people who had their best interest at heart. They read. They listened. They learned. They prayed. They short-listed their ideals. And then they got busy habituating toward that better life they dreamed of.

The fruit of all that labor is reflected in what you're now holding in your hands. And what I can tell you unequivocally is that as you begin to elevate the eleven practices they've laid out in the chapters to come, your reflexive reaction to the way your life unfolds will get an unmistakable boost. When we start prioritizing things like preparation and teamwork and integrity

and prayer, we become the people we long to be. What's more, we *rewire our default pattern*, making it easier to be that way again. In this manner, we remove the daily burden of deciding how to show up in the world. We'll have "pre-decided" our character; now all that's left is to *live*.

There's a line in the pages you're about to read that is one of the best value propositions imaginable, and it says this: "Right living is a *relief*."

Little in this world feels better than experiencing a *relief*. When you've been shouldering a burden or dealing with chronic pain or trying unsuccessfully to untangle a relational knot, nothing is better than knowing relief. You may even be audibly exhaling right now, just reading the word *relief*.

We want life to be *easier*, not harder. We want to do things that *make life work*.

Here's what I want you to know: relief is yours for the taking. And goodness, too. You can choose to experience relief. You can practice things today that will inform all your tomorrows so that those tomorrows are productive and good. Regardless of the choices you've made before, you can choose wisely now. Rack up enough of those choose-wisely days, and before you know it a habit will form. You'll be living a life of impact, and you'll be leaving a legacy that's strong. As is so clearly the case with Lauren and Tony, your influence will be uncommon too.

Santiago "Jimmy" Mellado
President and CEO, Compassion International
Colorado Springs, February 2022

INTRODUCTION

“How Many Kids Do You Have?”

Lauren

This isn't true for every family, I understand, but when my cell phone lights up in the middle of the night, Tony and I are pretty sure we know why. Over the past four decades, we have received somewhere between forty and fifty of these calls, and nearly every time, the person on the other end of the line was asking if we could take in a child in need of care.

I'm not a professional researcher, but based on what my husband and I have seen firsthand, people who are going to make poor decisions generally make those decisions at night—*late* at night. Call it decision fatigue or overloaded self-control or any of a half dozen other phrases that psychologists are prone to use—regardless, what it equates to is a troubled soul finding still *more* trouble once the sun goes down. Hours later, that person then heads home, is confronted by a loved one—“Where

have *you* been?”—and things escalate from there. The kids who were fast asleep are now wide-awake and petrified, wondering why the adults in the house are screaming, why one (or both) of those adults is slurring their words or is stoned out of their mind, and why the people who are supposed to be taking care of them can't even take care of themselves.

Police are nearly always called to the home. Sometimes, grandparents or neighbors are involved. Usually, child services shows up. And then we get the call. A stepping-stone of safety—that's how we've come to think of those middle-of-the-night interventions. Tony and the kids and I provide a few days (or weeks or months) of peace and security for a little one whose environment is turbulent at best.

These were the circumstances a few months ago when Dontae and Kallie arrived. It was ten, maybe ten-thirty on a school night, and Tony and I were about to turn off the news and head to bed when my phone lighted up. The agency had a four-year-old boy and his six-month-old sister in their care and wondered if we could take them in.

“It's a bad situation,” the agent explained to me. “The extended family member who had custody fell on hard times and returned the boy and his sister to their mom's house, where the mom was living with her boyfriend, who is the baby's father but not the little boy's.”

The problem with that turn of events was that the mom and her boyfriend were in an abusive relationship, and while they'd evidently never physically harmed the children, it was no doubt an undesirable place for those kids to be. When I asked how the agency had become involved, the woman on the line said, “A neighbor saw the family member drop off the kids earlier

tonight and knew that the mom and her boyfriend weren't even home. Can you imagine? A four-year-old and a six-month-old, home alone?"

The neighbor had called the police, and now these kids had no place to go.

"Absolutely," I said, barely even glancing at Tony, who was searching my face for details. "Bring them here."

"How many?" Tony asked nonchalantly, after I'd ended the call.

"Two," I replied, to which he said with classic calmness and an easy smile, "All right. We'd better get ready, then."

The addition would raise our official kid count to thirteen. The speed at which that number shifted from week to week explains why whenever Tony and I are asked how many kids we have, we need to pause and think. "Well," I tend to say with a good-natured laugh, "it depends on how you want to define the word *have*."

Last Christmas, during a video interview, Dan Patrick asked Tony how many stockings were hanging on the fireplace there in our home, clearly incredulous over the sheer number of them. It took my husband a good six seconds to sort out how many kids we had just then.

"There should be . . . twelve?" he finally ventured. "Yeah, yeah, twelve," he continued, his confidence building. "Lauren, me, ten kids right now."

The operative phrase, of course, being "right now."

. . .

Every so often, I'll flash back in my mind's eye to a service at Bethany Baptist Church in Pittsburgh, which Tony and

I were part of several decades ago, years before we started a family of our own. Our pastor was our beloved friend Richard Allen Farmer, a dedicated believer who refused to settle for a theoretical faith where “trusting Christ” equated to little more than punching a ticket for heaven and then living any way you pleased here on earth. Instead, he chose—both then and still today—to work out his devotion to Jesus in practical, tangible ways, explaining to our congregation that the essence of being Christian was to *actually be like Christ*. The concept of asking, “What would Jesus do?” was far from a trendy slogan to Pastor Farmer, even as the “WWJD” merchandising tour de force was about to be all the rage. He asked himself that question all the time—genuinely, moment by moment, day by day—and then rearranged his thoughts, his habits, his life according to the answers he found.

“We function in the earth by doing what God would do if He were here in the flesh,” he would tell us. “We bind, we loose, we proclaim, we alleviate suffering, we encourage, we admonish, we rebuke, we love, we serve.”¹

Pastor Farmer would joke that we were to live like God’s body doubles, doing all the stunt work in the world while letting our heavenly Father get all the glory. It was a compelling vision for Tony and me. It was a compelling vision for us all.

From time to time, Pastor Farmer would host guest speakers who embodied this others-centric lifestyle he himself prized, and on one of those Sunday mornings, the topic was caring for children in need. The speaker was with a group called One Church One Child—to search for them today is to find active and fruitful branches still humming along in seven key states. The invitation to those of us sitting in the crowd that day was

to live beyond ourselves, to make our lives matter by investing in the lives of little ones in our midst. Tony and I were so moved by the presenter's passion for children, his explanation of the need there in Allegheny County, his determination to solve the problem of kids not having a place to call home, and his boldness in calling believers to get involved—*now*—that as soon as Pastor Farmer dismissed the congregation, we beelined it for the information table at the back of the sanctuary and told the One Church representative we were ready to get involved.

Along with others from our church who had been similarly compelled, we watched a brief video on foster care, and our formal training as foster parents started the following day. Despite being relative youngsters ourselves, God would use Tony's and my yes in wildly positive ways to come alongside young people who simply needed a shot at life.

The process for becoming foster parents was straightforward enough: after Tony and I completed our application, we were asked to commit to about thirty hours of home-study training that covered topics ranging from our legal rights as foster caregivers and what to expect regarding interaction with the children's biological parents to thoughtful child-development insights and cultural differences to be mindful of as we welcomed kids into our home and into our hearts. We were asked to submit all sorts of information—medical statements, financial records, and contact information for character references—and to complete a thorough background check. And finally, there was a series of home visits, where social workers checked and double-checked our place and our patterns to be sure that our lives would provide fertile soil in which a little boy or girl could grow. It was a Friday, late afternoon, when we'd received

our final check marks, and to Tony's and my overjoyed astonishment, we were asked that same day to take in our first foster child.

• • •

"Gypsy Guy?" I asked the social worker, wanting to be sure I'd heard her correctly. "That's his given name?"

"You got it right," she said. "And his sister, who may be joining him later in your home, is Jayme Girl."

I stood there in our compact kitchen, grinning as I jotted down their names on a piece of scratch paper. "Got it," I said. "What time should we expect you two?"

Gypsy Guy was seven and was prone to telling stories. Or that's what I assumed, anyway, given that one of that sweet little boy's first autobiographical remarks to me referenced his "seven siblings who lived with nuns in California."

I knew he had a sister, but wouldn't the social worker have mentioned the other kids when she was giving me the lowdown on this boy's life? I trod carefully with him from the beginning, wondering if he would prove to be more mischievous than Tony and I had suspected, but within days, I knew I'd adopted the wrong strategy. Sure, there was his head of charming dark curls. And his melt-you-in-place eyes. But deeper still, the child was smart. *Unbelievably* smart. And he was kind—that much was easy to tell.

One afternoon, during a routine check-in with the social worker, I broached the subject of Gypsy Guy's family. "Are there other siblings besides the one sister?" I asked, to which she said, "Oh! Yes, in fact, there are. Gypsy and Jayme have seven other siblings who are living for now at a children's shelter run by a

Catholic church in Southern California.” I grinned again. The little guy had gotten it exactly right.

“Gypsy was sent back here to Pittsburgh to live with his mom, but she wasn’t able to keep things together enough to hang on to him. Still, we’re all hoping she can rise to the occasion of getting all of her kids back. It’s going to take a while, but we believe she will get there.”

The social worker went on to tell me that the ultimate goal was to have all nine siblings together under one roof, and reflexively my heart sank. Despite the head count in the Dungy household totaling a meager two at the time, there was no way Tony and I could sign up for such a commitment. We were in our twenties, freshly married, and still trying to figure out who we were now that we were “one.” I was teaching school full time. Tony had just started his NFL coaching career. We wondered if adding nine children to the mix would derail us in some sort of permanent way. “There may be a time when this could be a workable situation,” I said to Tony, “but that time isn’t now.”

For more than a year, my darling Gypsy Guy would come in and out of our lives and our home with little to no warning. The poor boy would be shuttled here and there and everywhere while the adults responsible for him tried to sort out a solution, but more times than not, they were best-laid plans and nothing more.

On at least half a dozen occasions, Gypsy’s mom would be scheduled for a custody hearing and not show. The morning of the hearing, Gypsy would look at me and say, “My mama’s not coming. She never comes.”

I would do my best to reassure him, despite my fears that his intuition was right. Sure enough, each evening of those

scheduled hearings, the social worker would pull up to our house, Tony's little bachelor pad I'd freshened up for married life, and upon hearing our doorbell ring, I'd find a small face smooshed against our front glass. Gypsy Guy was ours once more. "What's for dinner, Mom Lauren?" he'd holler as he steamrolled us to get to the kitchen. "I'm *starving*."

The day came when we had to say goodbye to Gypsy Guy and his sister forever. Their caseworker was resolved to keep all the siblings together, and while I couldn't argue with the logic of that move, I thought my heart might shatter into a million pieces and I would completely lose it when I drew in that bundle of joy for a final hug. It was true: Tony and I couldn't hold on to those kids forever. But we could hold fast to our motivation for helping as many kids as we could. That motivation fuels us still today.

• • •

One of Pastor Farmer's favorite passages of Scripture to teach during his years at Bethany was the section in Matthew 25 that talks about the final judgment (verses 31-46). It's a passage distinctive in its ability to set our gaze on heaven while calling us to wise living here on earth, and each time Pastor read from it, something in me came alive. It's quite possible you've come across these verses before, but let me give them to you here again:

But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He

will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you fed me. I was thirsty, and you gave me a drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your home. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.”

Then these righteous ones will reply, “Lord, when did we ever see you hungry and feed you? Or thirsty and give you something to drink? Or a stranger and show you hospitality? Or naked and give you clothing? When did we ever see you sick or in prison and visit you?”

And the King will say, “I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!”

Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, “Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons. For I was hungry, and you didn’t feed me. I was thirsty, and you didn’t give me a drink. I was a stranger, and you didn’t invite me into your home. I was naked, and you didn’t give me clothing. I was sick and in prison, and you didn’t visit me.”

Then they will reply, “Lord, when did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and not help you?”

And he will answer, “I tell you the truth, when you refused to help the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were refusing to help me.”

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.

The first time I read those verses after meeting Gypsy Guy, our ministry as foster parents felt to me like the most striking example of these simple acts of service Jesus had lauded in his followers. Gypsy had been a stranger. He’d come to us with only the clothes on his back. He’d been thirsty and hungry . . . goodness, the boy was *always* hungry. He’d needed hospitality and care. He truly was one of “the least of these,” and Tony and I, despite all the things we lacked in terms of maturity and know-how back then, had taken him in.

If this was what following Jesus was to look like, was to *be* like, then my husband and I were all in. We didn’t have much, but what we had, we’d share.

We’d share it with kids in need of help.

We’d share it with the least of these.

. . .

You and I could debate who is the least of these and come up with scores of answers. Even by Jesus’ definition, “the least of these” seems to include *anyone* who is down on their luck. But the point is this: for those who are chronically hungry or chronically thirsty or chronically unsheltered or chronically unclothed or chronically lonely or chronically incarcerated—whether fairly or unfairly—Jesus says, “Go there. Help them.”

Don’t ask too many questions.

Don't think or pray too hard.

Just go.

Don't delay.

Go serve.

Go serve those in need *right now*.

I wonder if specific names or faces or groups of people are coming to mind for you as you read this. You might have family members who struggle to make it through each day in one piece. You might have a neighbor whose home life is marked by one tragic decision after another. You might know of people in your city who never have what they need to thrive. Who are “the least of these” that you tend to see? What simple gestures or resources would inject a little hope into their days?

For Tony and me, our answer to that “least of these” question has always centered on children. It seems to us that the stakes are much higher when children are the ones in need. Many adults have the life experience, the customary resourcefulness, and the time-earned stamina to survive hardship, even for an extended time. But place a child in the same set of tough circumstances, and their minds, hearts, and bodies will wither in a fraction of the time. They simply don't have the skill set to deal with suffering. They may be resilient, sure. But superhuman they are not.

This is, in part, why my husband and I had been drawn from the start to helping bring kids along in their respective journeys—Tony by coaching, me by teaching sixth-grade English, both of us by participating with Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, serving children in need overseas, and leading Sunday school classes in our church's children's ministry for years. So much *potential* resided inside each of those hearts, each of those minds. All they needed was a fighting chance.

We've always recognized that when you take in a child—for a brief hug or for months and months in your home—you help rewrite the code he or she is living by. In 2017, author Jason Reynolds wrote a bestseller titled *Long Way Down*. It was initially so well received that it was long-listed for the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, and once it hit the market, further awards kept rolling in. This book is about the code that urban youth live by. In the story, a boy named Will is determined to exact revenge on the person who killed his older brother, Shawn. In fact, Will heads upstairs to his family's eighth-floor apartment, retrieves the loaded gun his brother always hid in their shared bedroom, and begins the elevator ride back to the street, where he will hunt down the murderer and let retaliation have its way.

Why is this the plan? Because, according to his training, there is a three-part code you live by if you hope to survive life on the streets: part one, no crying; part two, no snitching; part three, always seek revenge. In other words, despite your suffering, hide the tears. Even if a police officer wants to help you, keep the facts to yourself. And regardless of competing morals, it's up to you to make things right.

The entirety of Reynolds's book takes place on that eight-floor elevator ride. It's a story that was evidently inspired by his own life. Reynolds had a friend get murdered on the streets and was determined to seek revenge. Would he go through with it? Would his character Will go through with it? How strong would that code prove to be?

I bring this up because it strikes at the core of why Tony and I do what we do. When children enter our presence—even if temporarily—they see order normalized. They see peace

normalized. They see excellence normalized. They see a husband and wife treat one another with respect and work together to solve problems and communicate in a loving manner—both with each other and with the kids in the home. For a moment, the madness they're used to is cast aside. Nobody is yelling. Nobody is cussing. Nobody is drunk or high on drugs. There are no punches thrown, no slaps sustained, no doors kicked in, no mayhem allowed to unfold. In other words, they see what's *possible* when a different sort of code is upheld.

Today, according to groups who study these things, approximately 350 million children worldwide are living in extreme poverty, which is defined as existing on less than \$1.90 per day. These boys and girls don't receive adequate nutrition. They don't receive adequate education. They don't receive adequate medical attention. They don't enjoy safety, or shelter, or peace.

In Hillsborough County, the general Tampa area of about 1.5 million people where Tony and I have lived for 25 years, at this writing, more than 2,000 kids live in out-of-home care. Of those children, just over 1,000 have been placed with a relative, about 800 have been placed in licensed foster care, between 200 and 300 live with a nonrelative of some sort, and about 225 live in group homes. The needs in each of these lives are all too real.

Not long ago, after Tony and I spent an afternoon reading our newest children's book to a school library full of second graders, the principal approached us to thank us for coming and said, "Bringing each of these kids a copy of your book was a very kind thing to do. These children don't have much, you know. A book to call their own is no small thing. . . ."

To help us understand just how under-resourced these students were, the principal went on to tell us that recently he

and the teachers had needed to institute a “Friday-afternoon sweep” of the school each week, whereby the entire staff would scour every room in the school, looking for children who’d tucked themselves inside closets, underneath tables and desks, behind wall partitions, and beneath the bleachers in the gym.

Seeing that Tony and I weren’t following the plot here, he said, “It’s because this school is where 99 percent of them get their meals each day. They eat breakfast here. They eat lunch here. They get a snack here. So, on Fridays, they hide themselves away, believing that if they can be in this place on Saturdays and Sundays, they’ll get food then, too.”

These children weren’t being fed anything nutritious at home. They would show up Monday morning utterly ravenous after two long days without food.

My heart leaped into my throat as I heard the principal explain the situation his young students faced. No child should ever go hungry in a world where abundance exists.

“But I’ve got to hand it to my teachers,” the principal was saying. “While we can’t allow students to spend weekends here, once our faculty realized the depth of the need, they banded together, pooled their dollars and cents, and started buying food for the kids to take home with them on Friday afternoons.”

Roughly 350 million children worldwide are in situations just like this one, or worse. Here in my county, 2,000 boys and girls are in this predicament—a figure that is likely similar for yours.

Both of those are *really* big numbers—so big, in fact, that if we’re not careful, we’ll glaze right over them and assume there is nothing we can do to help. Which, in my view, would be

a terrible misjudgment. Those statistics diminish as we come alongside one child at a time.

“Is it snack time?” Dontae said just yesterday with his infectious smile as he bounded into the room after preschool. He wrapped his arms around my midsection and buried his head in my lap.

“You’re hungry again!” I said, laughing. Of *course* he was hungry again. “What are we in the mood for today?”

“Graham crackers!” he cheered, his little fist rising into the air, his chest puffing out his tiny Superman tee.

“Graham crackers it is,” I said, rising to head for the kitchen, a miniature superhero nipping at my heels.

Maybe I couldn’t fix the struggles his family was facing. But in those moments, as I helped get him settled in our safe home, amid the chatter and giggles of loving siblings, a plate of yummy food in front of him, I rubbed his back for a minute, thinking, *I pray this memory will matter, dear Dontae. I pray it will help you envision the life you deserve. . . .*

. . .

It’s not lost on me that Tony and I never really expected to have a house full of kids. Or not *this* full, anyway. We had three children—Tiara, Jamie, and Eric—and as far as I could tell, Tony thought we were done. Three kids. Five members of the Dungy household in total. Five was a nice, round number, right?

I wasn’t so sure.

When our youngest was eight, a member of Tony’s coaching staff who happened to be a single man decided to adopt a son. He needed Tony’s help to craft a work schedule that would

allow for this major shift in his lifestyle, and he needed my help—and help from many other coaches’ wives—to outfit his home and the nursery of the baby who would soon be his. The experience of helping him prepare for this new arrival was preparatory for me, too. “Tony,” I said not infrequently during that season, “I think you and I should consider adopting a child.”

Tony was forty-five years old at the time and worried that, given his age and the incessant demands on his time, it wasn’t the right move. From a practical perspective, he had a point. But I truly believed I’d received a prompting from God to pursue adoption, and so Tony, to his credit, was all ears. I lost track of how many conversations we had across those weeks regarding how our little nuclear family would be affected by the addition of another child—an infant, no less. I leveraged every spare moment by providing Tony one more bit of information, one more piece of research, one more spiritual insight I’d gleaned. Over time, we both were led to the same conclusion: given the importance of every child to the heart of God, the practical needs that children right in our own zip code possessed, and our undeniable ability to pitch in and help, it was absolutely the right time for us to adopt. We brought home baby Jordan in August 2000, just six months after our first conversation with Heart of Adoptions, the agency that was helping us. Since then we have walked through this same process seven more times.

So far.

• • •

We’ve caught a lot of heat over the last many years from friends and acquaintances alike who look at Tony and me and ask,

“Why aren’t you two just *enjoying yourselves* at this stage of life—traveling, taking up hobbies, relaxing a little, you know?”

You know what “stage of life” they mean, right? The one that says we’re *old*. And given that Tony has hit the age when most people in this country officially retire and I’m not far behind him, I suppose that we aren’t exactly spring chickens anymore. But I figure that if there is one way to stay young, it is by surrounding ourselves with youth. And, boy, do we have plenty of that around. Perhaps this was my own parents’ life strategy, seeing as they fostered children well into their seventies. My grandmother Jessie Johnson had laid that course a generation earlier. She lost her husband from her first marriage to rheumatic fever when he was only thirty-two years old, but despite her terrible grief, she *still* took in children who weren’t her own. She remarried, and she and her husband established their home as a rooming house, as it was called back then, for anyone who needed a place to stay for a day, a week, a month. My grandmother would cook for those people and love on them until they could get back on their feet, find decent work, and move on. She lived to be ninety-six years old and took in down-on-their-luck adults and plentiful foster kids well into her eighties.

By way of response to those friends and acquaintances, I always throw a question right back: “What on earth could be more enjoyable than what we’re doing now?”

Listen, I know that some people dream of being my age because they think that *then* they will be able to travel the world or buy their dream house or lease the swanky new car. They think they’ll finally be able to golf five days a week or read on the beach for hours without being interrupted or

build that designer wardrobe they've always hoped to have. (To that last one, I should tell you that my sweet daughter Jade decided this past Mother's Day to make all the other kids and Tony pitch in to buy me a designer handbag, and while I was incredibly moved by the gesture, I had to ask Jade for coaching on how to wear it, and with what. Unless we're talking about running shoes, my attire intelligence is blissfully low.) They think that simply *accessorizing* their life will magically make it more fulfilling, despite their soul knowing full well that it won't.

What will satisfy?

What enjoyment will actually last?

• • •

I've always treasured time spent reading the Gospel accounts in Scripture—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—because it's there that Jesus gets to speak for himself. We don't just read *about* him in those four books; we read words spoken *from* him—from his mind, his heart, his mouth. A favorite passage for Tony and me alike is found in Mark 8, when Jesus is predicting his death for his disciples. "Then Jesus began to tell them that the Son of Man must suffer many terrible things and be rejected by the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but three days later he would rise from the dead," verse 31 says. "As he talked about this openly with his disciples, Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things" (v. 32).

Jesus turned to his disciples, rebuked Peter for his lack of perspective, and told the onlookers who had surrounded him to hear his teaching: "If any of you wants to be my follower,

you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it” (vv. 34-35).

Then Jesus delivered this powerful pair of questions: “What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?” (vv. 36-37).

He didn’t wait for answers to those questions that day, instead concluding his message with a sobering reminder to them—and also to us. “If anyone is ashamed of me and my message in these adulterous and sinful days,” he said, “the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (v. 38).

I think of the fleeting enjoyment of the best this broken world can offer, and I reflexively shake my head. *Uh-uh. Not for me. Not with so much on the line.*

Everyone else can have the dream house, the dream car, the string of dream vacations. You know what my dream is? It’s Oprah calling me up one day and inviting me to her house for a lovely interview about the importance of caring for kids, only to blow my mind partway through our little chat by having all fifty or sixty of the children we’ve fostered along the way pop out and yell, “Surprise!”

I would laugh so hard at the sight of those precious faces that I’d dissolve into a puddle of tears. So many decades. So many memories. So much love.

I’d gather them up one by one into the tightest bear hug I could muster. I would look into each set of eyes: *Are you happy? Are you healthy? Are you whole?* I would introduce them, one to another. And then I’d praise my God in heaven above.

“Look at this life you’ve given me!” I’d tell him. “Look at this life you’ve given *us*.”

Tony and I would come down from that emotional and spiritual high exactly never. Never! Can you imagine that glorious scene?

And you want to tell me there’s something more *enjoyable* than filling out that crowd still more?

I dare you to even try. If there is one thing I know for sure in life, it is that the only way to know fulfillment is to totally give that life away.

And so, this book.

. . .

When Tony and I sat down to begin outlining the book you now hold in your hands, we had one main mission: we wanted to go back and revisit the handful of ways that God had prompted us to “give up our lives” for his sake along the way. What were the choices he’d asked us to make, and how had those various decisions led us to where we are today?

Those choices form the backbone for the chapters you’re about to read, and while our yeses obviously have centered on serving children in need, once we jotted them down, we realized that they could apply to any sphere of service imaginable. In other words, our mission isn’t pushing you to get trained for foster-care parenting and set your gaze on adopting kids who need forever homes. Rather, we hope that by sitting with the intentional choices we’ve made, and perhaps making a few of them in your own life, you will be better positioned to fulfill the specific service role that God has in store for *you*. And that the journey will be a great one for you.

BIG GOD

Choose to See Divinity

Tony

“What’s the best advice you’ve ever been given?” Media outlets often have fun with this question, compiling answers from people of all walks of life, and the results are pretty inspiring to read. A few that have stood out to me along the way:

“Whatever you do, give it your all.”

“The way someone treats you says more about them than about you.”

“Your word is your bond.”

“Nothing in life is free.”

“Listen more than you speak.”

“Don’t harbor resentment. Holding on to bitterness is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.”

For me, topping the list of the best advice I’ve ever received has to be a bit of wisdom from Chuck Noll, the first coach I

played for in the NFL. I had just arrived in Pittsburgh, green as summertime grass, and was overjoyed to finally be able to chase my dream. I'd played football all my life but only had my sights set on going pro for a couple of years. At last, I'd made it. I'd arrived. I was actually going to be *paid* to play ball—that is, if I could secure a spot on the team. Millions of kids grow up wanting to gain entry onto the fields I'd be playing on, and the fact that I could become part of the tiny percentage of people who actually made it there caused my head to swim. I couldn't wait for Coach Noll to divulge the secret to making the cut.

You can imagine how disillusioning it was for me, then, when Coach gathered all us guys, sat us down, quieted us with his serious gaze, and said, “Gentlemen, welcome to the NFL. It's true: for many of you, playing football is about to be your official profession, but don't ever let it take over your life. Football is a profession. It is not a purpose. Big difference between the two. Do *not* make football your whole life. It is not your purpose. You have to find your purpose somewhere else.”

I reflexively shook my head. *Huh?* We'd all finally gotten to the pinnacle, to a real NFL field, and now we were supposed to somehow downplay that accomplishment? I was dumbfounded. Coach's input broadsided me that day, but I tucked his words away. Years later, they'd come to mind again, and by then, I'd know what they meant.

• • •

I've had the opportunity to meet and talk with thousands and thousands of people over the years—just the nature of the work I've done. And almost without exception, whenever I've broached the subject of someone's purpose in life, they look at

me like I've sprouted an extra eye. It's easy for people to tell me their profession—it's usually the first thing we ask someone, in fact. We find out their name and then instinctively say, "So what do you do?"

"I work in accounting," they say in response.

Or "I'm an optometrist."

Or "I work for the city."

Or "I'm still in school."

But while these answers can give us insight into how people spend their waking hours, they tell me nothing about the core of who they are. They reveal nothing about someone's *purpose* in life. Think of it this way: your profession is what you do, while your purpose is why you do it. Coach Noll's point to us first-year guys that day was that while it was fine to be professional football players, unless we had a driving motivation that went beyond racking up accolades and wins, we'd end up with a lackluster existence. We'd give everything to what was essentially a three- to five-year detour in life and be left empty-handed in the end.

When thinking about something as lofty as our life's purpose, I find it helpful to break it down a little right from the start. There are basically two ways of looking at purpose; keep reading to see which one better reflects your view.

In one camp, we have those who would say the world is theirs for the making. All that exists around them is raw material; how they form that raw material into the thing we call "life" is up to them. They are in charge of making meaning of the material; in other words, they are responsible for coming up with their purpose on their own.

In the other camp, we have those who would say, "No, there's a better way than that." They believe that the world already has

a given order and a given meaning, and that their only role in this whole deal is discovering that order and meaning and shaping their lives in conformity to it.

You can probably guess that the second camp is where Lauren and I like to hang out. Both of us were raised by parents—grandparents, too, for that matter—who staked their claim on the idea that Creator God established everything in the natural world (including us humans) and purposed it from the start. The Genesis account of how the earth and everything in it came to be was sacred text to our parents because it bore out this belief that people are *special*. “So God created human beings in his own image,” Genesis 1:27 confirms. “In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

All people are handcrafted in the image of God—*imago Dei*—and as such, they are set apart from the rest of creation. They are distinctive. They are God’s crown. Because of this, passages like the apostle Paul’s reminder to the church at Ephesus in Ephesians 1:3-8 were turned over like gems in the homes of our youth, carefully scrutinized, highly valued, tightly held. Those verses say,

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ. Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. So we praise

God for the glorious grace he has poured out on us who belong to his dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. He has showered his kindness on us, along with all wisdom and understanding.

There is a God, that passage confirms, and he knows us by name. Before he set the intricacies of the world in motion, he moved intentionally toward us. He loved us. He chose us. He forgave us. And there's this part, which I love: he *decided in advance* to welcome us into his family (v. 5) by making a way for our sinfulness to be made right.

Lauren mentioned in the book's introduction that over the years she and I have established various parameters for our lives that make day-to-day operations a little easier in the Dungy household, and if I had to cite the one reason why things are running pretty smoothly for us still today, it's that we have pre-decided the important stuff of life. I think it reflects the heart of our heavenly Father when we decide some things "in advance," just as God did in adopting us as his daughters and sons. In the same way that God decided in advance to pursue communion with us, the first pre-decision that Lauren and I made as a couple was to pursue communion with him. The first of our choices? It's to see God at work at every turn.

• • •

I've always loved the Old Testament character of Joshua, who served as Moses' right hand before taking over leadership of the nation of Israel himself. We know from that passing of the

baton that Joshua must have been daunted by his new responsibilities, which would include getting the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the famed Promised Land. “No one will be able to stand against you as long as you live,” God promised Joshua as he got going on this new mission. “For I will be with you as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or abandon you” (Joshua 1:5).

Even so, Joshua was unnerved. He’d spent so much time working for Moses—which, by definition, meant working toward the mission of reaching the Promised Land—that to think about entering that place without his mentor must have seemed all wrong. Not to mention undoable. In quick succession, God told Joshua to trust his—God’s—presence and power instead of his own. “Be strong and courageous,” God said in Joshua 1:6. “Be strong and very courageous,” he repeated one verse later. “Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do” (v. 7).

God reminded Joshua to study his Scriptures, meditating on them “day and night” so the young leader would be careful to do everything in them and so he could be prosperous and successful (v. 8). Then, in verse 9, God reminded Joshua that he wasn’t alone in life, saying, “The LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”

It was God who was at work among his people.

All Joshua had to do was follow God’s plan.

This is a clear picture of the kind of life Lauren and I want to live—a life of uncommon influence. Like Joshua, we want to be people who bring our weaknesses to God so his strength can shine brighter still. We want to hear clearly from our Father. We

want to put our trust squarely in him. We want to help others take steps along God's path of righteousness. And then, upon achieving whatever it is that God has asked us to achieve, we want to push pause on all that laudable activity and thank the One who made everything work.

Another way of saying it: we want our life purpose to center on knowing God well so that we can also help make God known.

• • •

Despite the Pittsburgh Steelers' ruthless on-field reputation when I joined them in 1977—this was back in the day when their defensive line, led to four Super Bowl victories in six years by Mean Joe Green, was known as the Steel Curtain—it was there on that team that I found God. I'd "given my life" to the Lord years prior, when I was nine or ten years old. But in terms of truly surrendering my day-to-day world to his authority and authorship, I realized I hadn't trusted God with much of anything until a few fully devoted Steelers showed me how.

I noticed something special about those guys right from the start. Their demeanor was different, their words were life giving, and their energy level was off the charts every single day. They were real role models for me of faithfulness, righteousness, and joy. As I hung around them, I started becoming more like them. They taught me to prioritize daily Bible reading, extended times of private prayer, and weekly Bible studies. But more than anything else, they showed me how to serve others—not by what they said to me but by what they did. Over the twenty-four months that I played for Pittsburgh, those players taught me that it wasn't enough to say I believed in God or

that I was a Christian. I needed to back those words up with actions—consistently, enthusiastically, sacrificially. They helped me see that if I went ahead and put these spiritual stakes in the ground, life would work better for me. As a result of putting God in first place in my life, my self-concept would be sharpened, my compassion for other people's struggles would deepen, and my desire to join God in his work to right the wrongs in the world would expand.

Fortunately, I followed them, and once I headed down that path, I never once looked back. By the time I met Lauren, I was deeply rooted in this lifestyle, and given that her passion for this way of life had been growing for years, as a couple we immediately bore fruit. It's fruit you can bear as well: you can learn to see yourself as God sees you. You can learn to see others as God sees them. And you can learn to spot serving opportunities that God longs for you to seize. These are the spiritual stakes I'm going to ask you to plant today. Not only will they make life work better for you, but they will help you influence those you come across for the better too.

SEE YOURSELF AS GOD SEES YOU

During that magical 2006 season in Indianapolis that resulted in a Super Bowl victory for our team, our guys hit a real rough patch. We'd had a 9–0 start to the season, which was fantastic, but then came a couple of close losses where we didn't play our best. That was followed by a catastrophe, a 44 to 17 loss to Jacksonville in December that felt like a knockout punch. It wasn't just an everyday loss; that defeat dashed our hopes for getting the top seed and a first-round bye in the playoffs. In one game's time, we'd fallen from the number one seed to number

three, and despite our noteworthy start to the season, some were saying that this was it for the Colts.

It was embarrassing.

It was demoralizing.

The team looked at me expectantly in the locker room after the Jacksonville game. Something big was surely about to go down.

But that's not at all what occurred.

"We're not making any sweeping changes," I remember telling the team. "We're not bringing in any new players. We're not altering any major assignments. Nobody will be riding through those doors on a white horse to rescue us. We're not tapping some savior here."

I told the guys that the only thing we'd be doing going forward that season was getting back in touch with who we truly were. Allowing nearly four hundred rushing yards? Manning completing only half of his fifty passes? Assignment errors, mental breakdowns, sloppy play? We were more connected than what we'd shown on the field. We were tougher than we'd played. We were far more disciplined than we'd looked. This wasn't who we were. I told them the solution was simple—but not easy: we had to get back to our identity. We had spent six years constructing a team based on executing fundamentals, working hard, and fighting for each other. At our core, that's who we were, and this was no time to abandon our plan. There was nothing earth-shattering in my message. I offered not a magic formula but a stubborn determination to follow the plan.

We spent the next half hour talking as a team about what we'd been working toward, about the various pieces that we'd put in place to help us reach our goals, and wouldn't you know

it—six weeks later, we were hoisting the Vince Lombardi Trophy, leaving many football “experts” shaking their heads over the wonder of it all.

It is no exaggeration to say that when we whisper this first yes in life—yes to God’s existence, yes to God’s sovereignty, yes to God’s ongoing activity in and through our lives—we can rest assured that we will always, always win. Granted, it won’t always *feel* like we’re winning. There will be trials. There will be tribulations. There will be setbacks. There will be struggles that all but take our breath away. But we will live to tell about these wrestling matches. These losses won’t take us out, as long as we follow the plan—God’s plan.

• • •

The apostle Paul, writing to believers in Corinth who were having trouble keeping their faith in God alive, reminded them that God “made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ. We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves” (2 Corinthians 4:6-7).

Then Paul continued: “We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed” (vv. 8-9).

I can’t tell you how many times Lauren and I have felt knocked down by life, several of which we’ll talk about in the pages to come. To know that such experiences simply *cannot* *destroy* the people who have tucked themselves under God’s

mighty wing has been a great comfort to us, and I suspect you'll find that truth comforting too. Just as Joshua was heartened by God's reminder that he is always with us, defending us, fighting our battles for us, seeing to it that we make it through whatever trials we face, Lauren and I garner great strength from knowing that God is on our side.

In the face of crushing burdens, we can be strong.

In the face of fearsome circumstances, we can be courageous.

When we stay tethered to our real identity, we can, as Paul promised in Philippians 4:13, "do everything" by the power of "Christ, who gives [us] strength."

So what is that *real identity*? Throughout Scripture, it's described in a variety of ways. Here are a few that have been most helpful to me over the years:

- We are accepted by Christ for the glory of God (see Romans 15:7).
- Those of us who have believed and accepted Jesus have been given the right to become God's children (see John 1:12).
- Once we are in Christ, "we are no longer slaves to sin" (see Romans 6:6).
- We are made complete by our "union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority" (see Colossians 2:10).

In Christ, we are accepted. In Christ, we are embraced as daughters and sons of God. In Christ, we are freed from destructive patterns. In Christ, we are made totally and utterly *complete*. Regardless of who you are, where you've been, what

you've done, and how you feel about all those things, this is very good news. No longer do we have to strive for acceptance. No longer do we have to hustle for approval. No longer do we have to writhe in the self-defeat that always accompanies chronic sin. No longer do we have to live fractured and fragmented lives. When we say yes to God—his existence, his eminence, his expert care for our lives—we say yes to a form of ourselves we've never seen before. This new model—this divinely transformed version of ourselves—is empowered by the Creator of the universe and, as such, can do things we simply cannot do on our own.

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As I made my way through my adolescent years, I was so driven by the competitive nature of sports—basketball, primarily, but also football and track—that I got myself in trouble now and then. I was this way in school, too, I guess, always pushing for the A, thinking that my GPA or being accepted into a certain college would show everyone that I was smart. But anyway, in athletics, I'm not proud to say that this drive to succeed made me a pretty insufferable guy. I hated to lose, because I wanted to prove to everyone that I was the best athlete they had ever seen. And worse than that, I was a know-it-all. I had the answer to every problem my team faced, and I wasn't afraid to let them know what it was. I even up and quit the football team one year because I was offended by something my coach had said. You get the idea.

I was a hothead.

A sore loser.

A sore winner as well, truth be told.

Those traits followed me through high school and college, but more times than not, my boorish behavior was written off as the “competitive” nature of a talented player. In my case, it was not so much competitiveness as it was immaturity. I needed to grow up some.

Interestingly, once I got a few years of maturity on me, graduated from high school, allowed college to smooth some of my rough edges, and met those Steelers my rookie year in the NFL, things began to shift. The truth of my identity began to sink in: that I was accepted and approved, that I was no longer a slave to sin. I began to understand that because I was “in Christ,” I was whole and holy and healthy and secure. I didn’t have to prove anything to anyone. I had all that I needed in God, and I could start living like that was true. I was still ultracompetitive. I just had a new approach to competing now.

In the same way that drawing a fussy baby into your chest allows your calm, steady heartbeat to lower the heart rate of that upset child, each time I chose to draw strength from God’s reservoir instead of mustering power of my own, all that amperage I’d been carrying around would settle down in me. The wildfire blazing through my nostrils, my mind, my veins, would supernaturally start to burn out. I still had the drive to win—make no mistake about that. But now I realized I could win without leaving a path of destruction in my wake.

I wonder if you can relate.

Maybe you, too, have seen some tendencies in your attitude or actions that are a little . . . out of control. Maybe your “passion” has started spilling over into rage-fueled outbursts toward the people you care about most. Perhaps the desire for excellence at work has morphed into a standard of perfection that

neither you nor your colleagues can meet. It could be that your appreciation for thoroughness is now an outright control issue that those in your sphere of influence are finding tough to take. I don't know what it is for you, but my guess is that you do. And you probably realize that if that pattern of behavior is left unchecked, it will surely take you down.

Is it argumentativeness?

Is it defensiveness?

Do you always need the spotlight on you?

Do you have to be the best?

Do you have to win the debate?

Do you need others' blessing to feel good about yourself?

The need to earn acceptance and approval, to prove our worth each day, can make us do some crazy things. Equally true: when we lay down all that hustling and humbly come before God, he infuses us with a level of confidence and peace that Scripture says simply can't be understood (see Philippians 4:7). This is key, because when you and I misjudge, misapprehend, misunderstand, or misbehave, our lives aren't the only ones we affect. There's always someone else on the receiving end of that mistake, wouldn't you agree? And based on (way too much) firsthand experience, we can't be helpful to someone we are simultaneously harming. We can't bash and bless someone at the same time.

SEE OTHERS AS GOD SEES THEM

My family's home is situated about a fifteen-minute drive from one of the greatest theme parks in the country, Tampa Bay's Busch Gardens. You'll recall that Lauren and I have a *lot* of kids and that we've had a lot of kids for nearly three decades

now. Suffice it to say, we've been to Busch Gardens a few times. We went three weeks ago, in fact, to celebrate our daughter Jaela's sixth birthday, and despite giving her complete power over which rides the family rode, everyone had a fantastic time.

I'm no expert on the subject, but in my opinion, some of the best people watching happens at theme parks. You see everything there: wild fashion choices, curious parenting techniques, questionable food-fare decisions, the whole works. There have been times when I was waiting on one of our kids who had to run to the restroom, sitting idly on a bench with some members of our family while the other members rode a particular ride, or hanging out at an outdoor dining table while our kids finished lunch. With nothing to do for a few minutes, I'd just watch all the people walking by. It's entertaining, right? So many kids and adults from so many walks of life; so much diversity packed into one tourist attraction; so many preferences, capabilities, habits, and nuances represented there—just incredible to behold.

On one such occasion, I remember sitting there thinking, *I wonder what God is up to in their lives.*

It almost became a game to me that day. I'd see a guy staffing a roller coaster—ushering everyone onto the ride, checking that lap bars were secure, and pushing the button to make the ride go—and I'd whisper to God, *Are you working in that young man's heart?*

I'd see a mom with two kids in a stroller and an infant strapped to her chest, withered from the humidity and heat, and I'd think, *God, are you working in that woman's heart?*

I'd see the teenager tasked with refilling people's sodas and ask, *What's up with him, Father? Are you working on him at all?*

In two of the four Gospel accounts in Scripture, we learn that when Jesus saw a large group of people, he looked at them “with compassion.” For instance, Matthew reports that “Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area [the region of Capernaum], teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:35-36).

As I read those verses, I see the importance of not just being *superficially entertained* by the people we see day in and day out but, rather, being *spiritually engaged* with them. Sure, it’s natural to elbow your spouse and subtly nod toward the person across the way who is boasting a “look” that is unlike anything you’d ever voluntarily wear, but that reaction does nothing to signal to God that you’re available to be of service to him.

Since I’ve known Lauren, she and I have worked diligently to stay motivated not by categorization but by compassion. Categorization is making assumptions based on people’s outward appearance instead of letting God show you something of their heart. It’s putting people in “buckets” before exchanging a single word with them: they’re old; they’re foolish; they’re disrespectful; they’re crude; they’re impulsive; they’re rebellious; they’re haughty; they’re dangerous; they’re obnoxious; they’re _____. We fill in that blank with all sorts of descriptors, even when we have never so much as *met* the person we’ve judged.

Guess how many buckets Jesus had? One. It was labeled *people he loved*.

Because he saw people as sheep in need of a shepherd, compassion was free to bubble up in his heart. Sheep that don't have a shepherd, incidentally, are in real danger of becoming lost, being stolen, or getting killed. Jesus was able to look beyond appearances and focus on the actual person inside because he *hated* those tragic outcomes for the people he'd come to serve.

He didn't want anyone to stay lost.

He didn't want anyone to be snatched from his grip.

He certainly didn't want anyone to die—not on his watch, anyway.

And so, moved by boundless compassion, he spiritually engaged with them.

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A few years ago, I was inducted into the NFL Hall of Fame, and along with the others who were enshrined that evening, I was asked to give a speech. I labored over those words, not wanting to forget to thank any of the friends, family members, coaches, or colleagues who'd made it possible for me to enjoy three decades in the league as both player and coach. And while my words that night felt unique to my history, my experience, and my life, I couldn't help but notice that all the speeches at the ceremony shared a similar theme. The names were different, but every one of us spent a fair amount of time thanking the people who had seen something in us that nobody else seemed to see. The ones who took a shot on us when there was no good reason to do so. The ones who believed in us even when we didn't believe in ourselves.

I think back on my upbringing in the small automotive town of Jackson, Michigan, and remember with a smile the guys who

thought I was special when I wasn't, who extended kindness to me when I didn't deserve it, who were generous with me to a fault despite having a thousand other ways they could have spent their money and time. Robert Burton, an older friend of mine, ran the rec center in Jackson, and when I was nine or ten years old, he'd say, "Tony, the gym closes at six, but if you and your buddies ever want to come and just shoot baskets or hang out, you call me, and I'll come open up. If you don't have a place to be, you can be here."

Frank Hampton was my barber for years, and I can recall scores of conversations we had while I was sitting in his chair, a towel draped around my neck. "Make me look good," I'd tell him. "Game tonight, you know . . ." Mr. Hampton not only cut my hair on those occasions, but he also tended to my soul. He'd ask questions about how my family was doing and whether we'd gone to church that week. He wanted to know what I'd been learning about God and whether my priorities were still ordered right.

Alan Truman was a friend of mine six years older than I. He made a habit of taking me under his wing. You'd think an eighteen-year-old would have better things to do than take a twelve-year-old kid to Friday night baseball games and football games or hang out for an hour tossing a ball in the park or go for walks so he could talk to me about how to get through my teenage years without succumbing to the drug culture that had infiltrated our neighborhood—so many neighborhoods, truth be told. But this was how Alan chose to spend his time, week after week, year after year. I didn't comprehend the depth of that investment until I was eighteen or nineteen myself, but once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. Alan Truman had given me things

I'd never, ever be able to pay back: insight, wisdom, know-how, savvy, courage, and belief in myself.

I remain grateful to him to this day.

My point in all of this is that, without exception, the people I knew in my childhood who were most devoted to Jesus were the same folks who were most devoted to me. Because they loved God, they had the capacity to love me. And I wasn't always very lovable, if I'm shooting straight. I look back on those relationships now and understand that their acceptance and inclusion weren't riding on my performance but, rather, on the potential they saw in me.

In the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, God asked the prophet Samuel to anoint a new king for the Israelite people after King Saul was rejected by God for disobeying a direct command from the Lord. He directed Samuel to Bethlehem, where Samuel would find a man named Jesse. God explained that the new king would come from that specific household of faith. As the prophet set out on his journey, God gave him this advice: "Don't judge by his appearance or height, for I have rejected him. The LORD doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (v. 16:7). Small detail, but God told Samuel this after he'd tried to select the first brother.

With that counsel in mind, Samuel reached Jesse and began interviewing his many sons. Abinadab—nope. Shimea—nope, not him either. "All seven of Jesse's sons were presented to Samuel," the text says, but "the LORD [had] not chosen any of these" (v. 10).

Samuel, confused by this point as to who on earth God had tapped for this all-important position, said, "Do you have

any other sons you haven't told me about?" to which Jesse said, "There is still the youngest, . . . but he's out in the fields watching the sheep and goats" (v. 11). Translation: he's not the kid you're looking for. He's barely six feet tall. He's slight of build. He wouldn't know a tight spiral if it popped him in the face.

Yet that unimpressive youngest kid was *precisely* the one God had tapped. When David showed up, having come in from the fields where he was working as a glorified livestock babysitter, "the LORD said, 'This is the one; anoint him'" (v. 12).

Those mentors of mine believed that once I was living surrendered to God's ways instead of my own, the sky was the limit for me. The world may have judged me according to the externals—how I looked, how athletic I was (or wasn't), my personality, my temper, my grades. But God—and those who served him—saw only my heart . . . and what might become of that heart someday. And so, believing the best for me, and disregarding what they were observing firsthand, my parents, my extended family, and those men worked to point me in the right direction—toward God.

. . .

I think about those selfless contributions a lot as I go through my day-to-day life all these years later. I try to give others the same acceptance, affection, and belief that those mentors gave me. As I encounter other people, I try to remember that they are God's image bearers in a very broken world. I try not to focus on any external characteristics that might taint my perception of them—how they look, how they're dressed, how they're behaving, what they say. Instead, I try to picture them as they

could be, perfectly surrendered to the Lord Jesus and exhibiting his attributes to the world.

None of us will ever get to that state of holy perfection in this life. But I find that when I focus on that ideal, it helps me treat others the way God himself has treated us all. In the apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome, he told the Roman congregation how God regarded them:

When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation.

ROMANS 5:6-9

This same perspective can be ours when we say yes to God's activity in the world. We can approach *every person we meet* not in a spirit of condemnation but rather in a spirit of compassion, of grace. Recently, after Dontae and baby Kallie had been in our care for a few days, their caseworker let us know that the children's mom would be connecting with the kids by Skype the following afternoon and that we would need to facilitate that virtual meeting.

It came as no surprise to me that Lauren's reflexive reaction to that news was to pray. Rather than judge the woman who

birthed these beautiful children for the life choices that led to their removal from her care, she sat there and prayed. Because she understands that all of us have sinned against God—herself included—she thanked him for the grace that covers every foible, failure, mistake, and misstep. She asked God about his plans for the kids’ mom—“What are you up to in her life, Lord?” she prayed. “How can I encourage her? What questions should I ask? How are you working even now to redeem this whole situation and to reunify the kids and their mom?”

There’s something a lot like Jesus going on in our hearts when we see others as God sees them.

Sixteen years ago, Lauren and I received unimaginably painful news. Our teenage son Jamie had died. Complicating this tragedy was the fact that his death was quickly ruled a suicide, a reality that would baffle us for years. Just like that, our warm, loving gentle giant was gone.

We believe what Romans 8:28 says, that “God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” It would take some time, but eventually God would give us glimpses of the good he was working from that devastating tragedy. Amid the outpouring of support from people who’d known and loved Jamie—the emails, the letters, the voice-mail messages, the cards—came confirmation that our request for Jamie’s organs to be donated had been received and processed and that waiting donor-recipients would soon be notified. Amazingly, we’d even been able to donate Jamie’s corneas. I hadn’t even known that was possible.

About a year after Jamie’s death, we got word that two people had each received one of Jamie’s corneas and now at last

could see. I thought about all that Jamie had seen through those eyes—the people nobody else saw, the outcasts nobody else thought to include, the needs nobody else stopped to meet—and I wondered if those transplant recipients now saw the world that way too. To Jamie, people were never an intrusion or an inconvenience. They were an invitation to see, to know, to love, to care, to serve.

People were never a distraction. They were a divine appointment in the works.

People were never a burden. They were a *blessing* sent straight from God.

Who are you? How are you? What do you need? How can I help? These questions formed the ticker that ran incessantly at the bottom of Jamie Dungy's heart.

There's a story in Mark 8 about a blind man who begged Jesus to heal him. Jesus took the blind man by the hand, led him to a quiet place, and spat on the man's eyes, which I've always found an odd touch. He laid hands on the blind man and said, "Can you see anything now?" The man looked around and said, "Yes, I see people, but I can't see them very clearly."

Jesus put his hands on the man again and completely restored his vision. (See Mark 8:22-26 for the full story.)

Help those people who now have Jamie's eyes, I prayed to God, *to see as Jamie saw.*

The truth is we'd all be better off seeing as Jamie saw.

SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES TO SERVE

When we say yes to God—his presence, his power, his redemptive activity in the world—we start seeing ourselves as God himself sees us. We start seeing *others* as God sees them too. And

then there's this: we start seizing opportunities for service that are ours alone to seize.

Throughout Scripture, we are reminded that faith without works is faith that is totally dead. This is crystal clear to us in the book of James, where we read these words:

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions?

Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

JAMES 2:14-17

Here, we are reminded that it's never enough just to *see as God sees*; we're also meant to *serve as he would serve*. This can seem burdensome at first blush. Who has the time and energy to serve others when most of us have our hands full just keeping our own lives afloat? We will spend the entirety of chapter 5 answering that question, but for now let me say this: once you start to see yourself as God sees you, and you start to see others as God sees them, serving the needs you discover around you will be the most natural thing you can do.

In the Dungy household of my youth, my mom and dad, Cleomae and Wilbur, always told my siblings and me that impact was far more important than income. Sure, they taught us to work hard so we could have good jobs. But that work was

never to be the focal point of our lives. It was *relationships* that were most important.

Hold the Lord in high regard.

Hold others in high regard.

Be prepared to share with others, as Jesus has shared with you.

These were formative beliefs for us Dungy kids.

May they be formative for you as well.