

SCARLET HILTIBIDAL

HE NUMBERED



THE PORES ON MY FACE

HOTTIE LISTS, CLOGGED PORES,
EATING DISORDERS, AND
FREEDOM FROM IT ALL

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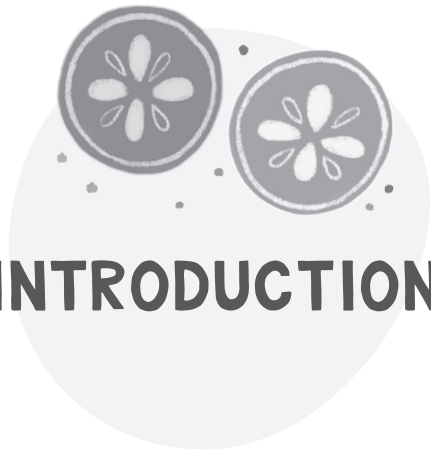
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INTRODUCTION

I used to stare at my own face in the mirror for fun.

I would lock my tween-age self in the bathroom of our two-story condo in Burbank, sit on top of the bathroom sink, and get as close as I could to the mirror, studying each pore as if I had to have their precise layout memorized by the next day. I'd sit, and I'd study, and I'd whisper. Softly, as I perused my pores, I would recite the speech I was going to give my crush when he finally said, "Scarlet . . . I love you, and I always have."

I imagined that when he told me that, on our last day of seventh grade, under a tree with just the right number of leaves to let in a romantically speckled amount of sunlight, I would be wearing a flower crown and a diamond anklet and a calmly radiant smile, like Mona Lisa. My response would be something like, "I love you too. I've loved you since the moment I saw you drawing UFOs on the paper bag cover of your earth science book in Ms. Chang's class. Also, you have handsome pores."

I practiced that speech, but I never got to deliver it.

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My mirror-proximity problem had a lot to do with the fact that I grew up with a very blonde, very blue-eyed, and quite famous mother. She got a lot of positive attention everywhere we went. I looked nothing like her. But something in me said that if only I looked like my beautiful, fawned-over mom, I would be happy. *Get it together, Scarlet. Be beautiful.*

I tried. At twelve, I wasn't allowed to dye my hair yet, so I squeezed lemons onto it and sat outside in direct sunlight. I'd read in *Seventeen* magazine that lemon juice made hair turn blonde. I remember desperately sprinting indoors to see if I was blonde and beautiful and ready to be famous. I wasn't. I was just weirdly sunburned. Those were brutal years of daily battles. No matter how many lemons I crushed, no matter how many pores I pondered, no matter how many articles I read, I pretty much always looked like this.



By the way, when I texted my sister, asking if she could track down a photo of me during my awkward stage, that photo came through in a matter of seconds, as if she already had it set as her home screen or something.

Anyway, I guess I'm an adult now? I'm the age I thought was old when I was a teenager. But I'm wearing a romper right now. Does that mean I'm still young? I say the answer is yes.

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Okay, so why is this oldish lady writing a book about her younger days? Well, because I have daughters who will check their pores soon. And I'm watching teen girls all around me growing up and growing scared and wondering if they are enough.

I see them. I recognize the look in their eyes and the hopes in their hearts.

I look around and I see it. My oldest daughter is pretty confident, and she's suffered no shortage of compliments in her eight years. But even as young as four, when her baby sister was born, I could already see the twinge of hurt wash over her face when people complimented her little sister's bright-blue eyes. I could already see the wheels turning as she tried to decipher the meaning behind her brown eyes, as she listened to a convincing internal voice, for maybe the first time in her life, whispering, *You're not as beautiful as you should be. You're not as special as you could be.*

I don't want these girls—this beautiful, bubbly generation of young women—to waste years trying to look different, trying to be adored by the wrong people, and trying to accomplish stuff that looks like everything but feels like nothing. Instead, there's a real freedom and deep peace already sitting there from Jesus. That freedom eluded me when I was a teen. It's something I'm just now starting to grasp, thirty-plus years into this life.

My adopted daughter, Joy, was born without ears. She's only five, but she's starting to notice the sparkles in the ears of girls around her. She picks earrings out of my jewelry dish and holds them up to her head. Then she slips

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on a twenty-nine-cent necklace, smiles into the mirror, and signs “beautiful” to herself. Even at five, she longs to be admired.

But no matter how many times I tell my oldest that I want to eat her beautiful brown eyes up like milk chocolate kisses, or how many times I show Joy that a sparkly necklace is beautiful, just like a sparkly earring, their deceitful little hearts aren’t going to be able to ignore the crushing messages the whole wide world will offer them.

*You're not enough unless you're this . . .
You can't be happy unless you buy this/wear this/
have this/look like this . . .
If you can't do this, you might as well give up
now . . .*

That’s a problem. That’s an everyday, every-girl, soul-level problem.

So, what can help? What can fix it?

Certainly not me.

I can’t save any of you from being broken humans. From chasing the wrong things. From believing lies. From having broken hearts that betray. From falling and crying and hurting. I wish I could. I look at my daughters and the teen girls at my church and the teens I pass at Target, and I wish I could force hope into female hearts. I can’t.

But I can share what helped me. What made me finally settled and joyful and more hopeful than not. I (almost) never stare at my pores anymore. And it’s not because I

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fixed all my problems. It's not because my pores have magically improved over the past twenty years.

Listen: I'm still not pretty enough, or accomplished enough, or popular enough for my heart to be happy. And I don't think I've ever really found self-esteem. Peace doesn't come because I learned to love myself. There are plenty of reasons not to love me. But you know what?

I am loved.

Not by a guy with relatively little acne. Not by friends who think I'm smart or fun or (fill in the blank). Not even by myself. Those loves are weak loves. Like many have said before me, I am loved, as are you, by the One who said that you are so broken that someone had to die for you, but you are so treasured that He did.

We are loved by Jesus, the One who made us, the One who rescued us, the One who wants to be with us forever. When we understand who we already are—forgiven and loved daughters of God—because of what Jesus already did on the cross, who we haven't dated and what we haven't done are insignificant.

Your identity, or who you are, is not tied up in what you look like or what you've done or what you'll do. You are a girl who Jesus loves. That's your identity.

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done or what you'll do. You
are a girl who Jesus loves.
That's your identity.*

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I pray that you who have found this book will grow up to find the answers to your search for security and beauty and self-worth in what Jesus has already made true in you.

My seventh-grade mind told me that a flower crown and some confidence would make me beautiful and happy. But even then, God was pursuing. Even then, He was helping me to see who He died for me to be.

The sooner your heart switches from seeking self-worth to seeing what Jesus says you're worth, the sooner you will experience what you long for—that easy, carefree smile you see on the girl by the lockers who seems to have everything she wants and needs. She doesn't, actually. But she can. And so can you. Because—get this—everything you want and need really is found in Christ.

As we fumble our way through each day, falling and failing and trying again to make our lives more centered on a crown of life than on a crown of flowers (see James 1:12; Revelation 2:10), I pray that God will continue to transform us from the little girls we all often are into mature women whose eyes are looking not to a mirror that tells us what we look like, but to a Savior who tells us who we are.



Section 1

**THE GOSPEL
REDEFINES WHO
YOU WERE**



Chapter 1

THE HOTTIE LIST

In 1999, my dad found “The Hottie List” under my mattress. It was a well-thought-out ranking of the eighteen hotties I went to school with on the basis of cuteness, dreaminess, and how likely I felt they were to fall in love with me. The conclusion at the bottom was a succinct exclamation.

“Ayyyeeeeeee! I just love boys soooooooo much!”

Three things:

1. The “Ayyyeeeeeee!” was because I lived in Miami. *Note: If you didn't know, Miami is roughly 99.9 percent Hispanic. “Aye!” is kind of like saying “Oh man!” or “Wow!”*
2. Yes, that was a real sentence I wrote on a real list of real boys' names that I still remember.
3. The list was buried in my bed and, had the world been fairer and had my dad been

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a less thorough bed-maker, would have stayed buried in my bed forever.

You see, I had this complex about growing up. I felt guilty and ashamed that I was starting to like boys. Ranking hotties, for whatever reason, was a secret so classified that it had to remain hidden in my heart and under my mattress.

When I got home from school that day and heard my dad say, “Scarlet, I was changing the sheets, and I found . . .,” I instantly collapsed into a puddle and let out a sound very similar to a whale noise option on a sound machine app.

I knew what was under those sheets. I now knew that he knew what was under those sheets. We both knew that I had a list, and that it was a list full of hotties.

(Whale whimper)

I spent what felt like the rest of the evening, but was probably more like ten minutes, sobbing weakly in the corner of my messy closet. I had my little sister bring me two slices of Papa John’s at dinnertime because I was hungry but too devastated to emerge from my corner of mismatched socks and outgrown shoes.

We both knew that I had a list, and that it was a list full of hotties.

Why did I have such icky feelings about my hottie list? I think part of it was that it all felt so far-fetched—the idea that any of the

THE HOTTIE LIST

eighteen hotties I listed could ever feel the same way about me. Or even close to it. But mostly I didn't want anyone on earth to know that I had thirteen-year-old-who-won't-be-named ranked ahead of another thirteen-year-old-who-won't-be-named, simply because one time he accidentally (but maybe not too accidentally) bumped into me in line at the lunchroom, and that seemed like a really right way to start a life together.

Hotties All Over the USA

I grew up going to elementary school with the same seventy-five-ish kids in Miami until seventh grade, when my mom moved us back to Los Angeles for her job. I thought my class was pretty small compared to classes down the street that schooled kids my age by the thousands. But this new school in LA, well, let me put it this way: there were two boys in my grade and eight girls. We were a class of only ten humans. There was a very distinct “popular group” and a clearly noticeable “outsider” cluster. I was immediately well loved by members of the less cool cluster and by my English teacher, Mr. Chapman.

Also, because the boys were scarce, my hottie list was pretty short that year.

I really liked this one boy—let's call him Johnny—but he was too cute and too sweet and too talented and just generally too out of my league to even waste hottie list space on (though that didn't stop me from reciting my “I love you too” speech in my mirror with him in mind. If

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you'd like to revisit the speech, flip back to the intro). He was a drummer, and he had impossibly bright-blue eyes. Well-liked by the populars, he was also kind to the cluster. My approach with him was basically just to try not to take every kind gesture he directed my way as a marriage proposal.

But I didn't stop with Johnny. I decided to add another out-of-my-league guy to the list. Due to the shortage and unattainability of the (two) boys in my grade, I started observing boys in other grades. Well, one boy. He was a boy a year ahead of me; I'll call him Jamie (but that's not his name either). I remember his real name, of course, and his spiky hair. He hung out with the populars in my grade and his. Tragically, I was caught in the cluster.

Something you also need to know about this period of time is that a movie called *Clueless* was a thing. The main character, Cher, was blonde and pretty and cool (I mean, duh; her name was Cher—more on the importance of names and popularity in chapter 9), and when guys liked her, she'd roll her eyes and flip her hair and say things like, "Ugh! As if!" or "What-ever!" while making a *W* with her fingers.

To an oldest child with no real gauge on what teen romance was supposed to look like other than hearing the lyrics of Celine Dion (she was the Adele of my day) songs, my brain told me that whatever Cher said to boys who liked her was the cool, acceptable, and appropriate response.

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The problem was, I wasn't cool, and by most teen guy standards, I wasn't pretty either. But I didn't know that yet. I just knew what Cher would do.

So, one day, I was walking up the outdoor stairwell to get to my next class when none other than Jamie himself, in all his spike-haired splendor, came up behind me and said, "Scarlet, will you go out with me?"

He couldn't see my face, which I'm sure had a huge smile plastered on it. I was too excited to be right in the middle of what I thought was my first romantic experience to notice that he and his friends were already giggling when I swung my head around and barked, in total Cher-from-*Clueless* fashion, "GO OUT WITH YOU? UGH! AS IF!"

This is a true story.

But somewhere between the "ugh" and the "AS IF," I read the room and realized I wasn't being asked out at all. I was being made fun of.

Humiliation is just not a fun feeling at all. When you think you're being flattered and realize you're the butt of the joke, it's completely the WORST. And when it happens during your Cher impression, it is somehow more the worst. And it opens your heart up to believing some pretty terrible lies.

Hottie-Rejection-Induced Lies

The whole "Ugh! As if!" incident made a string of questions start looping in my head, every day, all the time. I'm not sure if these crippling questions had been there before,

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but after the Jamie joke crushed my heart, I crawled back to my cluster, and the questions came continually.

Am I ugly?

Am I weird?

Am I a joke?

Why am I a joke?

Do I need more eyebrow scrunch on my "AS IF!"?

What am I doing wrong?

Am I doing anything right?

What do the cool girls have that I don't?

Why do I get the trendy things exactly one second after they stop being cool, every time, without fail?

Will I ever be pretty?

How does someone get pretty?

Will I ever be admired?

Will I ever be loved?

Our hearts have a natural enemy (remember that mean, convincing voice we talked about in the introduction?), and he loves it when our inner monologue is full of lies. His

name is Satan. He is real, and he

loves these questions. You've

probably already heard them.

You've probably already asked

them. He loves to prey on girls

in middle school, high school,

college, and even women in

their thirties and beyond, caus-

ing us to question whether or not

we are loved.

Our hearts have a natural enemy, and he loves it when our inner monologue is full of lies.

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He especially loves to get us thinking about our past mistakes.

Our enemy wants us to feel unloved, and then he wants us to spend every moment of the rest of our lives remembering the moment we believed those lies with our whole hearts.

He wants to lead us into horrible moments of humiliation, regret, and sin, and then bring our minds back to those moments over and over like a playlist on repeat. He wants us to set up a tent and live there. Because if we live there, we are crippled. If we live there, we are slaves.

The First Lies

Have you heard of the first girl who ever lived? Her name was Eve.

Please fight the urge to skim over this part because you've heard/read/seen the story a dozen/hundred/thousand times.

Listen: I'm with you. I've heard it countless times as well. I know that Eve's story can easily become this kind of bogus-sounding tale you feel detached from. Like, *Yeab, she was this old lady who talked to a snake and ate fruit and ruined everything and hid in a shrub and messed everything up for the rest of us, who would have totally preferred living in a perfect garden.*

But let's just think about this on a more personal level.

Before Eve was a sinner and a snake-talker and a fruit-eater, she was just a girl. The first one. Eve had no other

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girls to compare herself to on Instagram. Because there were no other girls. And there was no Instagram. Can you even *imagine* that life?

And God loved this one and only girl fully and completely. And she walked with Him, and He told her and showed her, through the blessing of a perfect world and friendship with Him, that she was loved and she was special. With His acts and His words, God showed this first girl that she could trust Him. *I have created you so that we can be together, and I'm giving you and this first boy everything I've made.*

But soon, even with no other girls around, with no Netflix or social media feeds, she started hearing other words. The enemy of her heart was there at the beginning with lies that have been told since the very beginning. She heard those little lies and the sly doubts and questions that the enemy planted in her heart. . . . *Does God really love you? Is He really faithful and true? Are you missing out on something better? Are you not good enough?*

Eve doubted her Maker and questioned her value and chose to sin in hopes that she would become something more. Something enough. She ate the fruit, trying to quiet the questions, and she changed the course of the world.

She and that first boy brought sin into the world, which brought with it pain, evil, suffering, doubts, hopelessness, insecurity, loneliness, and so many tears. Ultimately, her sin fractured her perfect relationship with her Creator, the one thing that would have really made her happy.

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And like the many ailments and tendencies we have inherited from our parents and grandparents, a sin-infused nature has also been passed down to every single one of us. We continue to cry over the pain that sin brought with it. The questions have carried over. The lies have lasted a really long time.

We believe the lies of mean guys and mean girls and a sinister enemy because we were born with hearts that distrust God. We were born chasing things that lead to death and running from the only One who knows how to perfectly love us.

It's all right there in our origin story. In Genesis 3, the first recorded words of Satan are, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden?'" (v. 1).

Satan is so evil and shifty. He didn't flat-out say the lie. He made Eve consider it herself. He set the stage for HER to birth the lie.

Maybe for you, it starts out something like, *Is what that girl said about me true?*

Maybe that lie leads to *Am I really worth anything?*

And maybe that lie leads to *Is there something I can do to get what God isn't giving me?*

And paying attention to those lies and doubts leads to actions that are sinful, which ultimately separates you from the only One who can give you joy and peace inside. The only One who can really tell you who you are.

Maybe you join your peers as they make fun of the quiet girl who always eats lunch by herself, and that makes you feel like you fit in for a second, but then you remember

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that God's Word says, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40).

Maybe you cheat on that math test you didn't study for because, hey, you need a good grade, and maybe you get away with it, but for some reason, when you pray, it feels like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. You're feeling what the Bible calls conviction. Your sin is literally separating you from a relationship with the God who made you. "But your iniquities are separating you from your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not listen" (Isaiah 59:2).

And once Satan has gotten you to that point one time, he will take you back to that horrible moment as many times as he can. We've all been there, but we don't have to stay there.

The Opinions of the Hotties

Being a teenager is a unique moment in life. It's a time when people are good at observing the world but don't have much experience living in it yet. It's easy to see life but hard to know what it means. It's easy to identify hotties but difficult to know how to feel about them.

It's so crazy to me that I can think through the hotties on my list from 1999 and still remember how important their opinions were to me. They were boys who lived with their parents and played video games, and now that I look at them from this place of more maturity, I can smile and

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say to my former self, “Oh, little Scarlet! Don’t worry about these boys! You’ve got your whole life ahead of you!”

I suspect that your future self might look back at the things you spend all your time thinking about today and say, “Oh, younger self, don’t worry about what that guy said. Don’t worry about how you had corn stuck in your teeth at the exact moment the tallest linebacker on the team finally struck up a conversation with you. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you.”

What the hotties think doesn’t matter for very long. The opinions of hotties and all the other people in all other places are fickle and fleeting and often look foolish when we are looking back. And rarely are they worthy of prime mattress-hiding placement.

But there is one opinion that matters. There is one first opinion that was shared with the first girl and her first boy. And even though they sinned and we sinned, that first opinion can still be heard because the work of Jesus makes it so.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.’ . . . And it was so. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good indeed” (Genesis 1:26, 30–31).

For the Goody-Goody and the Train Wreck (Hint: You Are Probably Both)

So maybe you don’t cheat on tests. Maybe you spend a lot of brainpower feeling angry and superior over people

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who do. I don't know whether you're the girl who tries to keep all the rules or whether you're the girl who has broken them and doesn't know how she's going to stop and put her life back together. I'll tell you this though: I've been both, and both girls need the same thing. Girls who have messed up and girls who have exhausted themselves trying not to, girls who break rules and girls who bow to them, girls who try and fail and girls who fail to try, all need Romans 5.

Romans 5:15–17 tells us that sin came into the world through one person, and it tells us that one other person, Jesus, took on the punishment for the sins of all who would believe in Him and offered them new life.

We all need to know that even though the first boy and the first girl broke God's rule and broke our hearts and bought the lies and ruined God's original plan, Jesus fixed everything for us. He obeyed for us, believed for us, lived for us, died for us, and rose for us, so that in Him, God can say again, "It is very good indeed." Neither kind of girl, the goody-goody or the train wreck, can do anything good enough to make God love her more or anything bad enough to make God love her less. Jesus kills the lies and restores the opinion and makes us valuable forever.

This reality I'm talking about—that we are loved and forgiven and approved and free because of what Jesus did for us—is what Christians often call "the gospel." The word *gospel* means "good news." When we look at the gospel, this message that Jesus came to deliver, we see that His love for us is the only true, forever, trustworthy love we can count on.

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Hotties will let us down. Every last one of them, no matter the degree of hotness.

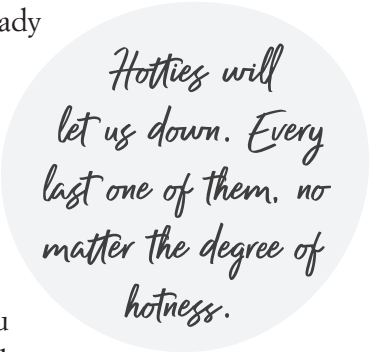
But we're not living to impress hotties—as much as it feels like we might be. We're not even living to impress God Himself; He's already and eternally impressed.

You won't look perfect and act perfect. You won't string enough days in a row where you haven't done something you're ashamed of. If there were a set number of “good” days that could make you holy or if you were even capable of that, Jesus' death would have been the *most pointless thing ever*.

When I look to my past and remember seventh grade, when I was unloved and humiliated by a boy with spiky hair and a slightly cooler status than mine, I'm not looking far enough. When I look back farther and remember the cross, it's then that I remember the biggest truth and the truest love. The ultimate act of love was when Jesus allowed Himself to be cut off from the perfect love of His Father and He suffered the greatest humiliation so you and I could be free and whole and safe.

The older you get, the more times you'll mess up, and the more times you mess up, the clearer you'll see the weight of this magic love and what it means for your life.

Get this—if your happiness rests on Jesus' ability to love you, you will never be let down, and through the cross,



Hotties will let us down. Every last one of them, no matter the degree of hotness.

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you will always know where to look to remember that you are loved and beautiful and enough.

A Way Better List

I no longer keep a hottie list, but I still frequently misplace my identity. I've found, as an adult, that one of Satan's best strategies is to make me feel that the approval of someone on a fancy list will make me happy and give my soul peace.

I can still find myself living in the past and living for lists, even though my name has already made it onto the only list that matters (see Revelation 13:8 for more on this one).

Maybe for you, it's middle school hotties or the line-backer on the varsity football team (I liked that guy too). Or maybe you're trying to get on the president's honor roll list. Maybe you're trying to get Harvard's attention by being on the list of students with the highest SAT scores. *Side note: There was a guy in my graduating class who got a PERFECT score, and yes, he graduated from Harvard. I keep tabs.*

Or maybe you *don't* want to be on a list. Maybe it seems like your name is permanently engraved onto a less-than-lovely list, and you wish there were some kind of powerful eraser that could make it go away.

Maybe you've been involved in one too many decisions that have made all your classmates move your name to the "do not invite" list.

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Whatever the lists are, we're all looking at them. We all want our names on this one and off that one.

For me, when I'm walking in weakness, the lists I linger on are almost identical to the lists I looked to as a teenager. They are still all about who is paying attention to me and what I'm accomplishing. Who likes me? Who can label me "approved"?

If I get on a best seller list, will people I admire consider me successful?

If so-and-so retweets that thing I said about ice cream sandwiches that I thought was so clever, does that mean I've "arrived"?

If I wear the jeans that fray at the ankle, get the right kind of hair scrunchie, get in shape, have better hair, and so on, will people I do life with think I'm on the cool list?

I'm thirty-two! When this book comes out, I'll be THIRTY-THREE. And I still catch myself longing to be on lofty lists.

And it's embarrassing. And it's sad. And it's wrong.

Sometimes, I realize I'm living for lists—best seller lists, Twitter lists, cool-people lists—and I feel shame. I feel like my dad just discovered my hidden hotties.

And that's actually pretty accurate.

Because God loves us, the Holy Spirit is always making us aware of hidden motives and idols and things that feel right but will wreck our lives.

Our heavenly Dad pulls "hottie lists" out from underneath the mattresses because He loves us and wants us to find worth in Him alone.

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But Satan is so quick to twist the words of God, just as he did with the first girl in the garden. He twists God-given conviction into shame and makes us feel like our hottie lists are being discovered over and over and over by everyone.

He'll even twist Scripture in a way that condemns.

"Well done, good and faithful servant." You? Are you kidding me right now?

"Those he justified, he also glorified." So how many Instagram stories have you wasted your time on today?

He'll even twist moments of growth and sanctification. He whispers, *Look how bad you are/were/will be. You'll never be holy. You'll never make the cut. You'll never be on anyone's good list. Whose bad list are you on right now?*

Here's the awesome thing. No matter how much shame I feel about the original hottie list and every list I've idolized since, Jesus has already put my name on the holy list in the book of life.

Romans 5:5 says that hope doesn't put us to shame because God's love has been poured into our hearts.

My shame is Jesus' shame, and Jesus' shame was nailed to a cross. Jesus' holiness is my holiness, and my "holiness" can never add anything.

So, how come we still live like our hottie lists are being found?

Because, we are forgetful.

The accuser may say that Luke 19:17 ("Well done, good servant!") isn't for you. But that's a lie. It is for you because when you become a follower of Jesus, you are, once and for all, no longer you, but Christ in you (Galatians 2:20).

THE HOTTIE LIST

You won't get a "well done" because of any list you've made or any list you're on or any secret you've hidden or any person you've impressed. You'll get a "well done" because Jesus has done well.

Living with the knowledge that you can be guilt-free today and guilt-free forever can give you the freedom to smile and walk humbly, brushing off hottie-related hurts, and realizing that you are already walking in the only identity that really matters. You are a girl who Jesus loves.

"Ayyyeeeeeee!"

