

## Advance Praise for *Reckless Love*

“*Reckless Love* is short, sweet, and delightful. I love John Newton’s stories—his Facebook story, to name one, is amazing!—and I love the way he tells them. Funny, mildly self-deprecatory, and entirely easy of access, they bring the book completely to life. And they are all in service of a disarmingly accessible intro to the core dynamics of Christian life: calm, compassion, total mercy, infectious humor, and honest joy. *Reckless Love* is a charming introduction to, well, the Good Lovin’ (Young Rascals) of God.”

—The Rev. Dr. Paul F. M. Zahl, retired dean and president  
of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry,  
Ambridge, Pennsylvania

“John Newton bravely calls us to see the reckless love of Jesus with fresh eyes. He weaves his own witness with the relentless (and often offensive) message of the Gospel. I was left remembering that mercy for the sinner is the only real relief.”

—The Rev. Sarah Condon, associate editor  
of the *Mockingbird*, cohost of *The Mockingcast*, and Episcopal  
priest at St. Martin’s Church in Houston, Texas

“John Newton’s *Reckless Love* clears away the cobwebs of fear, smallness, and perceptions of scarcity that seem to clutter the human condition with a wonderfully beautiful message—that we are deeply, profoundly, even ‘recklessly’ loved.”

—The Rev. Marcus Halley, rector of St. Paul’s Church on  
Lake of the Isles in Minneapolis, Minnesota

“Our grace-starved world needs to hear good news. Thanks be to God for what John Newton has written, offering hopeful reflections on the ministry of Jesus and the witness of saints, sharing stories of transforming grace. The good news of God’s reckless love described in this book offers a lens that can guide us forward with confidence and courage in a world marked by fake news. Each chapter, concluding with engaging questions, invites the reader into that way of seeing. You and your community will be blessed by taking this book to heart.”

—The Rev. Jay Sidebotham, director of *RenewalWorks*

“John Newton reminds us that Jesus is with us in the broken places and Jesus is with us in our joy and celebration. On the floor in front of the church altar. At the bedside of a loved one where we keep watch. In the streets where we cry for justice. On the playground where laughter is carried on the wind. In the communities where we live. Jesus is here—and loves us . . . with love that is never-ending. With a love that is reckless.”

—Roger Hutchison, author of *Jesus: God Among Us*

# Reckless Love

The Scandal of Grace in a  
Performance-Driven World

John Newton



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# INTRODUCTION: SIGHT

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. (Mark 8:22–25)

There’s an old joke about a man who visits the eye doctor. The receptionist asks the man the reason for his visit. The man complains, “I keep seeing spots in front of my eyes.” The receptionist asks him, “Have you ever seen a doctor?” The man replies, “No, just spots.”

This joke speaks to the question I want to frame for your reading this book: what do *you* see?

“Can you see anything?” Jesus asked the blind man from Bethsaida. Jesus asks us this same question. “Can you see anything good, beautiful, true, lasting, and holy amidst this performance-driven world of competition, violence, fear, impermanence, and greed?”

I recently noticed that a habit of mine was blurring my spiritual vision. Specifically, I imbibed the news on my iPhone the moment my alarm sounded. Before my feet touched the floor or my first sip of coffee, before I woke my daughter or kissed my wife or said my prayers, I began my day by reading a long list of things I need to fear. I then had an epiphany about the news

itself, which I ask you to read with theological eyes and not political eyes: it is all *fake news*.

I don't mean that real facts aren't offered, that honest journalism doesn't exist, or that the news is devoid of integrity, because none of that is true. I mean that when reading the "news" was my morning habit, I began each day terrified. I feared our nation, other nations, and how our nation relates to other nations. I feared a terrorist attack, a cyberattack, a heart attack, and even a gluten attack. I don't even know what gluten is.

I began each day seeing, not what God sees, but what the market-driven media wanted me to see: namely, a world that is falling apart, a world where I have enemies that I need to protect myself and my children from, a world where my value, identity and performance are fused, and above all, a world that is *not* reconciled to God in Christ. Theologically speaking, *that* world is fake news, because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and Christ has gathered all of creation into God.

The "real news," from God's perspective, is always the surprising, hilarious, outrageously wonderful message that all of creation is restored in Christ *now*. One day we will see and experience the fullness of this restored creation. For now, Paul says, we see God's restored world only "in part" (see 1 Cor. 13:12). However, I know from experience that "in part" is better than "not at all" and that a small improvement in vision can yield miraculous results with respect to how we experience God, life, and even ourselves.

Thus, I begin each chapter in this book with a passage from one of the four Gospels—a piece of "real news," so to speak. Each chapter is intentionally brief and seeks to make visible the unrelenting love that God has for human beings. I did not write this book to tell you what you *should* be doing, but rather to help you see the reckless love of God in and through Jesus Christ.

A clearer vision of God's grace always breaks into our life when we least expect it. I experienced this firsthand recently when my car broke down. As the tow truck pulled up, all I saw

was how much money the repairs would cost and how much time it would take to fix my car. Imagining those things made me feel lonely, sad, and apprehensive. Then I saw a very large, intimidating man get out of that tow truck. I saw tattoos, sunglasses covering his eyes, and biceps bigger than my head. He walked toward me at a rapid pace with his arm lifted. I suddenly felt really scared.

That upraised arm then landed gently on my shoulder. “Mr. Newton,” he said, “I know this is hard and that you didn’t plan for this. No one ever plans for their car to break down, do they?” I said, “Huh?” But he continued. “We will get through this together, Mr. Newton. I will make sure this mess gets all sorted out. I’ll tow your truck to the dealership, and I will give you a ride home along the way.”

His name was Walker, and this large, tattooed man was the embodiment of sensitivity and compassion. At one point, I looked at him and asked: “Walker, are you a Christian?” “No,” he said, “I am a Libra.”

Walker was very strange, indeed, and every bias, guess, and assumption I made about him turned out to be dead wrong.

I wonder: *could the same be true about God?* Is every bias, guess, and assumption we make about God wrong? When we “see” God through these biases, guesses, and assumptions, do we see anything worth seeing at all?

If we go with the flow of the world and, I hate to say this, the moralistic preaching and teaching that leaks out of far too many churches, the only thing we will see are spots: spots of fear, spots of greed, and spots of unredeemed pain. These spots always shrink us into a small person who protects with a terrified fierceness the little life we think is “ours.” But according to the “real news,” we don’t have a life. Rather, Jesus Christ is Abundant and Eternal Life, and we are safely held in him—a different way of seeing altogether.

And so, if nothing else, I wrote this book to clean the lenses of our glasses and to remind us of what the real news is: namely,

Jesus Christ is the reckless love of God, God's Seed of Love sown into every crevice of creation, including that small bit we sometimes call "our life." I pray that this book will be an unexpected hand that lands gently on your shoulder, a compassionate voice saying, "We will get through this together." Perhaps it will be the saliva on your eyes, an experience of Jesus taking you by the hand and opening your eyes to a whole new world so that what Mark said of the blind man will be true for us, too: "His sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly" (Mark 8:25).

## Chapter 1

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# Reckless

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” (Mark 4:3–9)

The first home I ever purchased had only one flaw: a barren front yard. I did not consider this to be a problem when I purchased the home, as I figured I would plant grass. However, I quickly learned that planting grass is hard. Recklessly throwing down a few squares of grass seed won't yield a plush green yard.

Planting grass, I later learned, would require loosening the ground and then meticulously raking the ground into a thousand little furrows. I would then need to scatter seed carefully and evenly. Next comes the wheat straw to hold in the moisture

before watering, which of course is its own science. If you water the yard too much then the seeds will wash away, but if you fail to use enough water the seeds will never grow.

My front yard remained barren for the three years I lived in that house. I never planted the grass, but my research yielded loads of information about horticulture. I learned that a careful farmer is cautious and strategic, diligent and methodical, calculated and selective.

I find it shocking that Jesus's most famous parable is about a farmer who lacks these qualities. The farmer in Jesus's story is reckless. He throws seed around like it is confetti on New Year's Eve. Seed falls on the path, the thorns, the rocky ground, and some in good soil. The farmer in Jesus's story is wasteful and lavish and anything but calculated. The real shock comes when we discover who this farmer represents: God.

I used to believe that the purpose of this parable was to warn the faithful about the pitfalls of wealth and distraction. I read it as Jesus's way of encouraging me to be the good soil. Christians weren't supposed to be materialistic, shallow, and hard of heart like the rest of humanity, who represent the bad soil. This, I thought, was the parable's meaning—that a Christian has a calling to be good soil unlike the rest of the world; what Christianity offers is a road map on how to become good soil. This was a well-known truth in my church growing up.

Jesus did not tell parables to confirm well-known truths, but rather to shatter well-known truths.

When Jesus told the parable of the sower, everyone in his audience assumed they knew who God favored, that is, the "good" soil. God favored the right, the respectable, the religious, and people who kept the Law. This was well-known truth to anyone who knew anything about religion in Jesus's day. Only a fool would dare question this truth.

Was Jesus Christ himself such a fool?

On multiple times Jesus went on public record to state that God looked more like a reckless farmer than a stern and

calculated judge. Jesus never spoke of a careful, cautious, strategic, diligent, methodical, calculated, and selective farmer looking only for the best soil to invest in. The God Jesus revealed looks more like the farmer in this parable: reckless with love, wasteful even, and in a terrific hurry to sow love wherever—simply because the nature of God is to sow love everywhere.

This is not a parable about good soil, but about a recklessly gracious Sower. It is a parable about a God that goes about recklessly sowing love wherever, irrespective of conditions. God, it seems, could not care less about return on investment.

Our experience of Christianity pivots on our understanding of this parable. “Do you not understand this parable?” Jesus asks. “Then how will you understand all the parables?” (Mark 4:13). If we get this parable wrong, we get the gospel wrong.

This is the question the parable of the sower confronts us with: do we know the reckless love of God that is perpetually poured out upon every human life and every ounce of creation in all seasons and conditions?

Imagine how exciting and transformative churches would be if they poured love into their community like the farmer in Jesus’s parable. How spiritually rich and full of joy would our lives be if we loved and blessed the people in our lives with the same reckless abandon with which God blesses and loves us?

Becoming a reckless lover of all people is much like planting grass: easier said than done. We feel pain when our love falls on rocky, arid, or weed-infested ground. We want to give up and to stop loving when that happens. It hurts when the people we love don’t love us back, and our great temptation is always to layer our heart in protective armor to ensure that we don’t get hurt again. We hedge our bets by loving selectively and methodically. We are calculated lovers. We scout out the good soil and invest our love there.

The God we know in Jesus Christ refuses to love selectively. Jesus Christ, hanging naked from a cross with arms wide open, pronounced forgiveness on the mocking crowds. Jesus’s whole

life, indeed his every act, was a living display of the parable of the sower. Jesus Christ is God's Seed recklessly sown throughout the world. There is no corner of creation where this love is absent.

God's reckless love is counterintuitive. People who exhibit true inner goodness are precisely the people who have learned that they don't need an ounce of inner goodness for God to love them. These fortunate ones know that God recklessly and perpetually sows love into the lives of thorny, rocky, and hard-hearted people. They understand that only God's reckless love smooths the rocks, dulls the thorns, and softens the heart.

What might it take for you to begin living a less calculated, methodical life and to love a bit more indiscriminately and recklessly?

We extend reckless love to others only to the extent that we know and feel the reckless love that God has for each of us. We are empowered to sow seeds of love only to the extent that we know the One Seed, Jesus Christ, sowed throughout creation, buried deep beneath the earth, raised on that first Easter morning, and now bearing fruit throughout the world in preparation for a great harvest of love at the end of the age.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus spoke in parables? Do you think Jesus told parables to shatter well-known truths?
2. Do you believe that some people are "good soil" and that others are "bad soil"? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe that God is "reckless" with love? Can God be reckless and calculating at the same time?