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*Chapter One*

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SAWMILL

Seeing the Veneer

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THOU ART THE GO-BETWEEN OF RUSTIC LOVERS;  
THY WHITE BARK HAS THEIR SECRETS IN ITS KEEPING;  
REUBEN WRITES HERE THE HAPPY NAME OF PATIENCE,  
AND THY LITHE BOUGHS HANG MURMURING AND WEEPING  
ABOVE HER, AS SHE STEALS THE MYSTERY FROM THY KEEPING.

— *James Russell Lowell, "The Birch Tree"*



If you ever visit Pennsylvania Amish country, you might happen upon a little town called Lititz, a place where old men like to sit and talk about the weather, and old women like to sit and talk about old men.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, the town appears to be a simple place with not much to see or do. But once you find your way around, you realize the town is a hidden gem. A quaint main street with some local merchants and more coffee shops than coffee drinkers presents the quintessential spirit of Americana. Like most small towns, the tourist draws are a bit unusual: the oldest pretzel factory, the oldest girls' boarding school, and the second oldest chocolate factory in the country.

Lititz Springs Park acts as the epicenter of town, giving the locals a natural spring and the ducks a place to get free bread. A replica old-world train station was built at the front of the park to mark the history of the railway that cuts the town in half. The park amphitheater always has something going on. The most popular event each year is the Fourth of July celebration when visitors from all over the country fill the park grounds during the holiday week

to catch a glimpse of concerts, car shows, comedians. The celebration week culminates with the Queen of Candles ceremony. Thousands of floating candles are lit in the canal that runs the length of the park as one of the high school senior hopefuls receives the crown. An epic fireworks display follows, the final touch to one of the oldest Fourth of July celebrations in the country.

On the other side of the railway sits the Wilbur Chocolate factory. The weathered redbrick building stands five stories tall with a small gift shop on the first floor where locals and tourists can read up on chocolate, see how it's made, and, for fifteen dollars, buy enough of it to bake Christmas cookies this year and next. The aroma of chocolate that fills the air is the only fragrance that stands a chance against the smell of the Amish farms that surround the area.

If you want to catch the true vibe of the town, show up at Tomato Pie café any morning around 9:00. You can seat yourself at a table or sit at the original 1950s-style bar where the grizzled locals sip their coffee. All the things you aren't supposed to talk about, they do. Opinions on religion and politics are passed around as much as the sugar for the coffee. In the evening, a younger crowd fills the space, hopping on free wi-fi and suffering through homework. The café manages to seamlessly fuse the old with the new.

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On the outskirts of the town, past the shops of Main Street, you'll find what appears to be a wood junkyard—piles of old lumber stacked everywhere in no obvious pattern. From the entrance, the wood looks like stuff to be thrown away, wood that has lost its purpose. But a survey of the property reveals hundred-year-old barn timber going through the brutal process of finding new life. This junkyard turns out to be a working sawmill.

Dean Brandt runs this wood salvage operation. He collects antique wood, selling it as some of the most beautiful hardwood flooring you can buy. His father, Sylvan, who began the business decades earlier, coined the business's motto: "We don't offer perfection but, rather, the beauty of imperfection."

Dean scours the country looking for wood that comes from dilapidated barns and old farmhouses, weathered wood that most people send to the scrap pile. The wood's patina tells the story of the mature tree that produced it, as well as the story of how the wood was used. You can't buy timber like this at the lumber store; trees are harvested when they're young, so they aren't old enough to produce a rich character.

You can tell a lot about a tree by looking at its rings. The waves and lines reflect the tree's life—a fire, a disease, or a storm that bent the tree over or caused it to lose a

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branch. If a few of the rings are close together, then it was a dry season and the tree didn't grow much. The farther apart the rings, the more it rained, the more the tree grew. As the tree aged, its character deepened, as evidenced by the unique lifeline of its rings.

When Dean and his crew find this patinaed wood, the time-intensive process of giving it new life begins. They hand-strip each beam of the nails, staples, and other pieces of metal embedded in the grain. Sometimes this takes more than two hours. Then they rough-saw the beams with the massive sawmill blade and place the fresh-cut boards in a kiln for drying. The two-week drying process sucks out moisture and shrinks the boards.

After the crew retrieves the rough-cut boards from the kiln, they run them through a twin-blade saw known as a gang rip, which cuts the boards into various widths. Finally, the boards are run through a molder that simultaneously cuts the tongue and groove needed to piece the flooring together, while also planing both top and bottom of the board. The operation takes patience and hard work. But in the end, the reclaiming process reveals the antique wood's beauty, its rich grain enhanced by the hand of time.

Distressed wood and vintage furniture are popular. On any given day, you can flip on the television and see an interior designer showing you how to distress a piece of



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wood. He takes a new piece of wood or furniture and tries to make it look old by hitting it with a hammer or a chain. To Dean, this is wood heresy because there is no story to tell.

Telling someone you beat your coffee table with a chain is a little different from telling them the coffee table was made from one of the doors to your granddad's farmhouse, the same door that he carried your grandma through after he returned home from the Second World War and the same door that was on the house that your mom grew up in. The story of the wood makes it unique, and so you appreciate the scratches and the dents and the imperfections of the coffee table. Dean calls these blemishes the memory of the wood, beauty marks that contribute to the wood's uniqueness. "The beauty of imperfection."

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In the back of most Home Depots, past the lawn mowers and lightbulbs and refrigerators, you'll find the wood flooring section. The display shows a few samples and gives the price per square foot along with a flowery description. Employees, however, don't plane the wood in the back room or cure it for any length of time, and it was not salvaged from a hundred-year-old farmhouse.

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This type of wood looks real and feels real. But does real wood come in the same colors as a J.Crew sweater? The flooring that fills this aisle is engineered. It has a veneer, a thin covering that hides the real material underneath. Manufacturers do this to make the wood look expensive without the consumer having to pay for the real thing. They inflate the perceived value of the product by hiding inferior wood under a veneer.

But the flooring at Home Depot isn't the only thing that uses a veneer to give itself value. Like engineered flooring, people apply a veneer. Embarrassed by the scars of our humanity, we try to hide our brokenness. We use a veneer to cover over ourselves, hoping others will perceive us as having greater worth, as being more beautiful and perfect than we feel inside. Most of the time, we aren't aware that we're doing it; our culture is so glossed over with the sheen of fake perfection that we unknowingly comply.

Some of us will go to any lengths to hide ourselves and create a false identity. It's what we know because it's who we've become. Fashion designer Tom Ford looks at the American woman today and doesn't recognize what he sees. He says, "I don't understand all these breasts right now, and they don't look like breasts. They look like someone's taken a grapefruit half and inserted it under your skin ... We're starting to think that this is what women should

look like ... You're beautiful, you're glossy, you're shiny, but you're not human."<sup>2</sup>

We whiten our teeth, color our hair, tuck our tummies, and cut open our breasts to insert silicone. We inject chemicals into our cheeks and lips and eyebrows. We buy fancy shoes made from Italian leather, buy cars that cost more than our parents' houses, and go to jobs that suck the life out of us but pay great. We update Facebook with photos of all the interesting places we visit, and accumulate followers on Twitter who, apparently, are waiting to know what we ate for breakfast.

But have we ever stopped to reflect on any of this? Why do we want to look like the person in the magazine? Why do we want a better job or more money? What about social networking draws us to spend more time adjusting our profiles than talking to human people? Do we associate our identity, our worth, with physical attributes and objects like perfect white teeth, wealth, or the accumulation of nice things? Sadly, many of us do. We errantly think that by enhancing the physical, we will be able to find or communicate who we are to this great big world. After all, in advanced Western society, it seems expected that we inflate—or veneer—our selves in order to achieve recognition. Most people understand and accept this practice. It's part of the language of culture.

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But the more we venerate, the more comfortable our lives seem. When a whole society craves superficial beauty, instant gratification, and comfortable living, it's difficult not to play along in the charade. We are a people who, at the click of a mouse, can have everything we could possibly want but nothing we need. Philosopher Peter Kreeft observes, "There is something radically wrong with a civilization in which millions devote their lives to pointless luxuries that do not even make them happy."<sup>3</sup> We look to these luxuries to make life livable and to make ourselves feel as if we belong. But if we survey our society—the wealthiest in the world—we will find it rife with people who are struggling with depression and despair, hopelessness and lack of purpose, void of true identity.

As Christians, the idea of veneration goes against our core beliefs. One of our foundational beliefs is that we are broken, that we don't have it all together and that we need Christ; he gives us our identity. If this is true, and if the acceptance of this compelled us to follow Christ, then why do we try so hard to live as if we aren't broken?

Brennan Manning talks about this in his book *The Importance of Being Foolish*. He says the crisis of American spirituality is that the battle between wanting things of the flesh and surrendering to the Spirit is too much for Christians. Too often the flesh wins, and because of this, we lose

sight of the fact that we are children of God. “It is not that I am afraid to tell you who I am; I truly cannot tell you because I don’t know myself who I am. God calls me by name, and I do not answer because I do not know my name.”<sup>4</sup>

As followers of the Way, we have veered off course. We have become content to ape a culture that loves the self, merely going with the flow instead of cutting a new path through this inflated faux society. Instead of finding our identity in Christ, we have looked to venerate.

Pastor Eugene Peterson describes his fellow Christian brothers and sisters as “uncritically embracing the ways and means practiced by the high-profile men and women who lead large corporations, congregations, nations, and causes, people who show us how to make money, win wars, manage people, sell products, manipulate emotions, and who then write books and give lectures telling us how we can do what they are doing.”<sup>5</sup>

Peterson’s comments give us a clue as to how our world works and, more important, how it talks. As Christians, we end up believing in the distorted notion that physical beauty and the accumulation of fine things that the rest of the world seeks equals worth, equals identity. But for Christians, beauty has little to do with physical expressions and everything to do with the spiritual.

True beauty, some say, resides at the threshold of pain. This is why we can call the crucifixion beautiful. Not because we are barbarians, but because there's an inherent truth and goodness in it. Christ lays his life down for all of humankind, past, present, and future. This is good; *he* is good. And his goodness points us to truth, truth of redemption, truth of coming restoration, truth of forgiveness.

This is why we can look back on pain in our lives and call it beautiful. It wasn't beautiful then; it was hell. But from that hell grew a shoot, and from that shoot a leaf, and life sprang up where hell resided; that's beautiful. God makes it so.

We usually don't understand this kind of beauty in a person, but when we come across someone who is content with his true self, we are drawn to him. He is that rare person who emanates beauty through his approach to life, a beauty that comes from within, like the beauty of antique wood. We admire this. We wonder how nothing in society really touches him; he seems to walk between raindrops. We can't put our finger on what makes him so special. It's something altogether vibrant, something that inspires us to be better sons and daughters, husbands and wives – better people.



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If you drive to old Pumping Station Road just north of Lititz, you'll find a trailhead that leads out into the Pennsylvania State Game Lands. Locals use this trail to go hunting, ride mountain bikes, and enjoy the scenery. Back in the day, before Dean took over the sawmill, he and his friends partied in those woods. But over time, the partying got old. He started looking for God, or maybe God started looking for him. About the time Dean was in his thirties, they finally met. Like many of us, Dean met God with half a lifetime of baggage. The hurt from fractured relationships, the tensions within his family, the emptiness that comes along with years of hard partying—all the junk that scarred his life, like the memory lines of wood—was now in the redeeming hands of God.

If you were to meet Dean now, the first thing he would do is offer you a cigar. The second thing he would do is light it for you. Dean doesn't dabble in small talk. He has a way of always getting to something a little deeper. He likes to focus his conversation on the things that matter most in his life: God, family, and antique wood.

Of course, the fragments of his misspent youth linger. Like an old knee injury that moans every time it rains, Dean's past still creaks every now and then, but Dean's sense of commitment to God and his pursuit of an honest life prevail.

Dean lives with a righteous grit. When you look into his eyes, he doesn't look away. When you ask him a question, he'll shoot you straight. He doesn't bother trying to dazzle you with what he thinks impresses you. What you see is what you get.

As he continues to grow in his relationship with God, Dean finds more meaning in his work. He's figured out that time shapes a person, but that God has the power to reclaim a person. So it's fitting that Dean works with old barn wood. He understands it. He reaches back into the past—a time traveler of sorts—and revives a forgotten beauty. Dean loves living in this strange land of rejected barn wood; maybe he loves it because he understands the worth of the dejected and damaged. It seems that people like Dean are always the quickest to seize meaning when they find it. They're the ones who see value in discarded things when the crowd obsesses over the bright and shiny.

It's one thing to fail and to experience loss or embarrassment. We all do that. It's quite another to wear it on your sleeve. And that's what Dean does, not because he's proud of it but because he knows that the redeemed grime of his past makes him beautiful today.



*Chapter Two*

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CELEBRITY ME

Wanting Our Fifteen Minutes of Fame

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ABOVE ALL, LET THERE BE ENOUGH LIVE ACTION!  
THEY LIKE TO WATCH, AND THAT'S THE CHIEF ATTRACTION.  
WITH LOTS OF THINGS BEFORE THEIR EYES DISPLAYED  
FOR CROWDS TO STARE AND GAPE IN WONDER OF,  
THERE'S MOST OF YOUR SUCCESS ALREADY  
AND YOU'RE THE MAN WHOM THEY WILL LOVE.  
BY MASS ALONE THE MASSES CAN BE WON.

– *Goethe*, *Faust*



“That’s hot!” It was the catchphrase of the 2000s. Coined by blonde socialite Paris Hilton on her reality TV show *The Simple Life*, the phrase became the oft-repeated staple of office one-liners. The jet-setting heiress to the Hilton hotel fortune had never worked a “real job” in her life, but her over-the-top spending and partying made her a household name and landed her the reality show.

The media can’t resist telling the wild stories of how Paris handles her inheritance. Gossip columns and magazines regularly feature pictures of Paris parading from red-carpet events to fashion shows to A-list parties. Magazines like *Vanity Fair*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, and *People* feature her on their covers. She has written books, starred in movies and television shows, and recorded an album. A pop-culture icon, Paris is the quintessential modern celebrity: a person who has a life the public watches.<sup>1</sup>

Stand in the checkout lane of the grocery store, turn on the television, or surf the internet, and you will find no shortage of celebrity “news.” If it’s not Paris on the cover, then the headlines are about Angelina or Cruise or whomever.

*US Weekly*, *National Enquirer*, *Entertainment Tonight*, and *TMZ* all serve up the latest dish on what's hot, or not, in Hollywood. As a nation, our new favorite pastime is keeping up with the people we view on the screen, the lives of actors and actresses and athletes and musicians reported to us as if their lives are a movie to be watched.

Brad Pitt takes his shirt off in a hotel room in *Thelma and Louise*. He goes fly-fishing with his brother in *A River Runs Through It*. He goes crazy in *12 Monkeys*. He is a con artist in *Ocean's Eleven*. An outlaw, an old man, a Nazi killer—in role after role, his good looks and acting chops turn movies into blockbusters.

But our obsession goes beyond his film appearances. The media report on his relationship with Gwyneth. They split. He marries Jennifer. They divorce. He moves in with Angelina. The paparazzi capture it all through their grainy lenses—the relationships, the adoptions, the post-Katrina homes—as we follow Pitt's life story. At some point we start paying less attention to Pitt's talent and more attention to his "real" life.

The media portrays the celebrity life as the epitome of success. Entertainment news flaunt images of expensive cars, designer dresses, and exotic travels of the celebrity. Magazines feature pictures of their homes alongside decorating tips. Their bodies are scrutinized and promoted as

“perfect.” It seems as if the celebrity has the “easy life” we all daydream about.

When *People* first launched in 1974, the magazine reached a circulation of 1.25 million within ten months and recorded a profit within eighteen months. The selection process by which *People*'s editor chose a successful cover contains vivid insight into what the media sells: “Young is better than old. Pretty is better than ugly. Rich is better than poor. TV is better than music. Music is better than movies. Movies are better than sports. Anything is better than politics. And nothing is better than a celebrity who has just died.”<sup>2</sup>

Sitting at home, leading a comparatively normal life, we fantasize about the young, pretty, rich people we see in the magazines. As we thumb through the pages of magazines like *People*, we plug ourselves into their narrative. We think about what we would wear or whom we would date or where we would vacation. These thoughts, coupled with the image of success implied by the media, lead us to long for the celebrity life. In his book *Empire of Illusion*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Chris Hedges writes, “Celebrities, who often come from humble backgrounds, are held up as proof that anyone, even we, can be adored by the world ... Our fantasies of belonging, of fame, of success, and of fulfillment, are projected onto celebrities.”<sup>3</sup>

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Sports icon Tiger Woods led the life most men dream about. He was the private family guy who showed up on the weekends and played golf better than anyone else on the course.

But that all changed when Woods rammed his Cadillac Escalade into a tree. According to some reports, he was driving away from his wife, who found out he had cheated on her. A swarm of reporters camped out at the Woods' Florida estate to cover the story. And over the next couple of weeks, the media discovered and reported his extramarital affairs. Months later, his iconic image was tarnished forever; he checked himself into a sexual addiction rehabilitation clinic, and his marriage crumbled.

The news of Woods' affairs was jarring. The real Woods had just trumped the version we bought into. Shocked and bothered, we learned that we foolishly believed the veneer of Woods' life. When we hear a story like Woods', our perception of reality is shattered; we tune in even more to find out the real story. Realizing that Woods' image was false doesn't diminish the story for us; it makes it grander.

Megan Fox, the sexy star we saw bending over the hood of a Camero in the first *Transformers* movie, knows the act of a real person versus a character well. In her public life,

she projects an image that will sell movie tickets or increase ratings or move magazines off of shelves. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Fox explains how, in the media, she uses various characters in different situations, noting that “it’s a testament to my real personality that I would go so far as to make up another personality to give to the world. The reality is, I’m hidden amongst all the insanity. Nobody can find me.”<sup>4</sup>

Fox realizes that if she wants to find success, she needs to differentiate herself from the rest of the personalities in Hollywood. She perceives this as savvy business sense, and most would agree. The article goes on to explain that Fox’s tabloid narrative differs from the stories of other actresses; it’s not so much about who she is dating as much as it’s about her extreme personality. “You have to be put in a box in this industry so they can sell you,” Fox continues. “They need to get hits on their blogs or sell their magazines. So everyone is something. And if I’m not a party girl, which I’m not, I then have to be the outrageous personality.”

As it turns out, the life that the media *and* the celebrity portray isn’t always real. Publicists, managers, and lawyers carefully script the celebrity life to control public perception. In the same way that an actor plays a character on-screen, celebrities act their own roles in life—the boy next door or the wild party girl—their personas projected

through magazines, television, and blogs by publishers, publicists, and press agents.

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“Meet Julia Allison,” the headline reads. “She can’t act. She can’t sing. She’s not rich. But thanks to a genius for self-promotion—plus Flickr, Twitter, and her blogs—she’s become an Internet celebrity. How she did it—and how you can too.” This was the teaser for *Wired* magazine’s feature article about a woman named Julia Allison. She graced the cover in her sexed-up style, with an equally provocative article layout conveying the idea that she is a celebrity. But is she really?

Julia represents a fabricated expression of her true self. She leverages the internet through constant blogging and twittering to achieve celebrity status. Her trick “is to think of herself as the subject of a magazine profile, with every post or update adding dimensions to her as a character. ‘I treat it like a fire,’ she says. ‘You have to add logs, or it’ll be like one of those YouTube videos that flame out.’”<sup>5</sup>

And, for Julia, the self-promotion pays off. She has twenty-two thousand Twitter followers. Her Facebook page boasts approximately sixty thousand fans. Her Lifecast—a constant stream of press clippings, photos, videos, mus-



ings, and miscellany Julia finds interesting—shows pictures of her with movie stars and at gala events. A self-described “professional talking head,” in one year she appeared on television three hundred and fifty times.

Because of the success of people like Julia Allison, celebrity status is fair game to anyone with a laptop and web camera. We can all fabricate publicity stunts and manipulate pictures to become someone we are not. Everyone feels entitled to their 15MB of fame.

We find ourselves living within a society with the unprecedented ability to broadcast our lives through reality shows and YouTube videos, which have helped create a world that rewards the constant exposure of self. Modern man wants to feel recognized and visible and connected. He does this either on a mass scale, by trying to be on television, or on a smaller scale, through social networking sites.<sup>6</sup> The more followers we have, the more important we must be. The acceptance validates us. In our effort to be known, we can use the computer to manufacture a personality, becoming whomever we want.

Life on the computer screen permits us to “project ourselves into our own dramas, dramas in which we are producer, director, and star . . . Computer screens are the new location for our fantasies, both erotic and intellectual.”<sup>7</sup> So we live in two worlds. We all wake up and brush our

teeth and head to work. We get into real cars and have real families and friends. We go to high school football games, attend college, and get promotions. This world is very real.

The other world, however, lives primarily in the ether and in our minds. We see images on the television and the movie screen, we visit websites and blogs and follow people on Twitter, and suddenly this virtual world emerges. It's all towers of fame and wealth, and everything we could ever want stands in full view, staring us down, beckoning us. And so we indulge, plunging into the celebrity culture so we can escape the real world. We wake up, spread the preserves on our toast, and head out for another day, all the while envisioning what it would be like to live like someone who doesn't exist: Celebrity Me.

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After Jesus is baptized, he walks off to be alone in the wilderness.<sup>8</sup> He fasts and prays for forty days. Alone and hungry, Jesus finds himself tempted with the same things that tempt us in the celebrity world. "The dread and intelligent spirit"<sup>9</sup> entices Jesus with wealth and celebrity and glory.

"You are the Son of God," says the dread spirit. "Turn that stone into bread." With the point of a finger or the flicker of a thought, Jesus could easily turn stone to bread.

After all, later in his life, he turns water to wine and feeds five thousand with a boy's lunch. But Jesus doesn't need the bread. "Man does not live on bread alone,"<sup>10</sup> he answers. The world thinks we need abundance. It thinks we need wealth. Success. But no matter what the bread of society looks like, Jesus says, "No thanks." Our sustenance is found in God.

The tempter comes back with another test. "Throw yourself off this cliff. Call on the angels; they can save you." If Jesus were to dive off the cliff and if angels were to save him, the story of his grand escape would spread quickly. Jesus would become an instant celebrity. He would be loved and revered and worshiped. Certainly, he could skip the whole messy business of the crucifixion. But Jesus shuns the spotlight; he doesn't need the fame.

The tempter, a persistent bugger, returns a third time to show Jesus all the kingdoms of the land and their splendor. "All of this," he says, "I will give you. Just worship me." Jesus simply has to deny his Father and the tempter will give him wealth, fame, and power. But Jesus doesn't need a shortcut to glory. And so Jesus looks at his tempter and says, "Get away from me. You must serve God alone."

And that's that; the tempter leaves Jesus.

Jesus' response to the temptations he faced presents a stark contrast to the celebrity culture. As Jesus' life unfolds,

we see a man who sought the fame of his Father. Jesus shows us that those who follow him are called to seek not visibility but anonymity; “if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.”<sup>11</sup> A caveat to this verse does not exist; the path Jesus sets before his disciples winds into the narrows.

As Christians, many of us attempt to justify the pursuit of success as the world defines it. “It can’t be wrong to establish a bit of celebrity to obtain true influence,” we say. It’s a noble pursuit, right? But if we look around, we will always find someone with more money or more power or more fame. Success defined by the world’s standards leads down a path lined with anxiety and self-doubt.

Inherent in Jesus’ confrontation with Satan in the wilderness we see Jesus’ antidote for the lure of celebrity. In each response to the tempter Jesus shows us that true success, the kind God cares about, is the freedom of not feeling trapped by the rules of worldly success. And that freedom comes from obedience to the Father.

In his wilderness temptation, in his teaching, and in his prayer in Gethsemane, Jesus defers to God’s will. “I came down from heaven not to follow my own whim,” says Jesus, “but to accomplish the will of the One who sent me.”<sup>12</sup> What if we began to defer the so-called opportunities to increase our own celebrity to God the Father? What

might we find? Would we find a freedom to be the person God intended us to be? “We are not responsible for success,” writes theologian Klaus Bockmuehl, “but we remain responsible for obedience.”<sup>13</sup> What God creates with our obedience is his concern, not ours.

But we tend to choke on this kind of wisdom. The Christian leader often struggles to understand this, desiring the notoriety associated with worldly success. They think that because a person *can* create a celebrity persona, they should, and that once they obtain fame and wealth and power, they will leverage it all for the good of Christendom. The Christian leader, it seems, has fallen prey to the dread spirit, believing that in order to win the world, we must speak its language, forgetting that Christian leadership is not about “power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility.”<sup>14</sup> But not all of us struggle with the temptations that come with leading people. For many of us, our temptations emerge in the subtleties of popularity or the cool factor in how we dress. One way or another, the “look at me, I’m someone” complex surfaces. But somewhere in our heart of hearts, we hear the still, small voice that whispers, “It’s a sham.”

In some way, we all face the temptations of the dread spirit just as Jesus did. But we must remain obedient, just as Jesus was, recognizing the temptations as cheap versions

of the truth. As James the apostle reminds us, true religion “guard(s) against corruption from the godless world.”<sup>15</sup> We either obey, and conform to the will of the Father, or we conform to the world.

In C. S. Lewis’s classic *The Screwtape Letters*, we see uncommon insight into the lies of the tempter. The book is a fictional exchange of letters between a newly recruited demon, Wormwood, and his uncle Screwtape, an old pro. The elder Screwtape gives expert advice to his nephew, instructing him on how to trip up a new Christian convert. The advice centers on sidetracking the convert from the joy and blessed life found in God and, as a result, rendering his faith impotent.

In one letter, Screwtape warns Wormwood of the obedience that God demands of his followers. “But the obedience which the Enemy [God] demands of men is quite a different thing,” says Uncle Screwtape. “One must face the fact that all the talk of perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His.”<sup>16</sup>

In the vaneer of celebrity, we find ourselves striving after the world's idea of success, which elevates the self. When we buy into the vaneer, we begin living life with a focus that zooms squarely on the individual. What the individual wears, what they drive, how they behave define their success. In the elevation of such things, we see an unhealthy emphasis on the self take shape. We feel unsatisfied unless we have influence over others. We feel irritated unless others approve of us. We feel discontented unless we receive recognition in our work. Influence, approval, achievement; in the celebrity world, these are our idols.<sup>17</sup>

Theologian John Calvin is often quoted as saying that our hearts are perpetual idol factories.<sup>18</sup> This seems especially true in our celebrity culture, where the pursuit of self moves us farther from God and closer to loneliness; he fades as the star of self shines bright. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber comments, "Something has stepped between our existence and God to shut off the light of heaven ... [and] that something is in fact ourselves, our own bloated selfhood."<sup>19</sup>

But no matter how hard we try, an idol cannot fulfill our need for God—a real, living, intimate God. We need our God to be accessible, not with the on-off button of a remote control but through relationship. "An idol leads a man, by

necessity, into loneliness,” writes Bockmuehl, “when what man needs is a god with whom he can have dialogue.”<sup>20</sup>

The God of Abraham does not lead anyone into loneliness. He leads us into himself. He calls each by name toward himself, the essence of all that is good and holy, full of fear and wonder. This is where he calls you. It’s a place where the self decreases and God increases.

As Christians, we are to seek the good of others above our own. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* presents the question, “How then do the disciples [of Jesus] differ from the heathen? What does it really mean to be a Christian?”<sup>21</sup> He answers this with the word *perissos*, or “extraordinary.” But his use of the word *extraordinary* is not how we normally define it. Bonhoeffer uses it as a term for uncommon living. Christians are called to go beyond what is expected in society.<sup>22</sup>

If the world expects that we promote ourselves in order to achieve fame or make more money, then to be extraordinary, according to Bonhoeffer, is to seek that which is uncommon. Instead of doing whatever it takes to make more money, we give more away. Instead of elevating ourselves so others perceive us as great, we elevate others in their endeavors; we serve them.

Being extraordinary in our faith is being the light that



shines before the world. Bonhoeffer reminds us that it's not that we *have* light; it's that we *are* the light. We are, therefore, visible to the world, loving our neighbor, caring for the widow and the orphan, forsaking all to know him. These and other actions should make us visible. They are selfless actions, actions that tell the world our care is not about fame; it is about the extraordinary. All else is advertising.

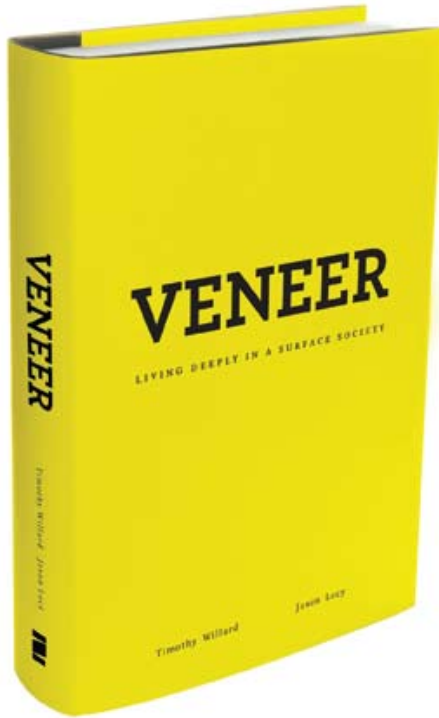
Bonhoeffer continues, "The better righteousness [that which is extraordinary] of the disciples must have a motive which lies beyond self. Of course it has to be visible, but they must take care that it does not become visible simply for the sake of becoming visible."<sup>23</sup>

So it comes to motive. In our brokenness, the celebrity motive compels us to be known. In our humility, the Christian motive compels us to be hidden—in Christ. When we attempt to communicate like the world, be cool like the world, use the same devices to become popular, are we being extraordinary? Or are we merely rising to the world's standard, which goes no farther than self-glorification?

There is no room in the Christian life for pursuit of celebrity. It doesn't make sense. Instead, Christ should shape our narrative. The story he writes does not look like one of celebrity fame and fortune but instead one of

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humility, giving, sacrifice, selflessness, and honesty. In this realization, we begin to find our way. We begin to see that compared with the spectacle of celebrity, our life is extraordinary.



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