

Living a Life Worth Following

Follow the leader – ever play that game as a kid? Someone is chosen to be the leader. Everyone follows him or her wherever they go, doing whatever they do until they get tired of the game or everyone else gets tired of following.

I did an informal survey among people I know asking them, would you rather be the follower or the leader. The response was not really what I expected. Some said, I'd rather do my own thing. Others said it depends on who I'm with. A small number said they would rather lead.

Leading

I find this interesting because even though I sometimes don't want to lead, I usually find myself in that spot. I prefer making decisions to everyone standing around and no one deciding.

I'm intrigued by those who admitted they would rather do their own thing. These are perhaps the boldest of all. They don't care what others want to do. They are loners.

The followers follow because either it's easier or they trust the leader. They don't have to make decisions, they just follow the Leader. This group may be the most spiritual of all.

Follow Me

Jesus hand-chose the disciples by saying, "Follow Me" (see Mark 1:17 and Matt. 9:9, NKJV). They followed without question. They left everything and just followed Him.

Their simple, spur-of-the-moment decisions changed their lives forever simply because they were willing to follow. Yet, many of them were leaders, businessmen, wealthy men and burly, working guys.

They followed without question. I have to ask myself why. Why did they follow this unknown rabbi? Why did they leave their families and walk away from their jobs?

Think about it for a minute. Even though they didn't know who He really was, they knew that He spoke with an authority they had never encountered before. The moment He spoke, their heads raised to meet His eyes and their hearts were knitted with His forever.

Take Up Your Cross

Fast forward in the story a bit and Jesus sends out these same men telling them not to take money, bags, extra clothes or belongings. He gives them power to heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead and cast out demons (see Matt. 10:8-10, NKJV).

In His advance pep talk before they go out, He adds. "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:38, NKJV).

This is a whole new level of following the leader. They would know that He meant for them to be willing to give up their lives for Him (see Matt. 16:21-23, NKJV). And yet they continued doing what He told them to do even though at times it seemed crazy.

He reinforced the statement later saying, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matt. 16:24 NKJV).

He certainly does not paint a pretty picture of what it means to follow Him. He promised nothing and yet He gave them everything.

Follow Me?

He's still doing that. He asks us to invite others to do the same. Paul even had the audacity to tell the Corinthians, "Follow me as I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1, MEV).

I have always read that with fear to think others would be following my interpretation of what it means to follow Christ.

I knew there were huge areas of my life that were not under obedience to Christ when I was using food as my main emotional crutch. I didn't want anyone to follow me. I could teach them about the Bible, but don't do what I do. Don't eat your way to super, morbid obesity.

Mentoring

Now that I have surrendered the specific foods holding me back, I realize I have an obligation to mentor others. Don't get me wrong. I'm not perfect. I have faults like everyone else. I've learned the value of following a mentor I trust. I still have mentors who speak into my life and have my permission to call me on mistakes. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Now I am a mentor or coach helping others on their journeys. It is one of my greatest privileges and joys to be able to see another catch hold of truth, incorporate it into their lives and run with it.

Our journeys here on earth are to be ones of leading others to the resurrection, life-giving power of Jesus Christ. That's the message of the empty tomb. Where there once was death, there is now only life.

New Beginnings

If we belong to Christ, each of us has gone through a death of an old life. "The old life is gone. The new has begun" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NLT).

Each day, though, can be a new beginning. The day I

surrendered sugar and flour was definitely a new day for me. Each day I release more emotional baggage and spiritual misbeliefs. Each day I am set free in more areas.

I love it so much, I can't help but share the new life I'm living. It is for freedom I was set free (see Galatians 5:1, TPT). I just follow the Leader.

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Why Confidence Isn't the Answer to Fear

Rarely do I get headaches, but I think I'd been stressed over the last few weeks, which led to shoulder scrunching and a grand finale of muscle knots.

While the house was quiet on Saturday, I talked to God about this stress—trying to get to the root of it. Landing on the word *fear*, I acknowledged that I run a low-grade fear all the time. Fear that I'm not doing a good job teaching my students. Fear that I'm not taking care of my body or my home the way I should. Fear that I'm not loving my family and friends in a meaningful way.

Insidious Fear

I think what I need is confidence, Lord, I prayed.

So I looked up the word CONFIDENCE:

A feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities.

A definition full of "self"? That was definitely NOT what I needed. **Confidence is not what God prescribes.** He wants us to exercise poverty of spirit, a constant awareness of our weakness and great humility.

But I want to be confident. My soul screams for it.

I want to be confident!

I don't want to be inadequate. I don't want to be needy. I don't want to make mistakes that require an apology. I don't want to fail and have to relearn. I don't want to give anyone a reason to correct me. I despise this hunger I have, to do what is right every minute of the day, only to find myself falling short of being good.

But Jesus speaks these words:

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt. 5:6).

Almost every day, when I thank the Lord for my food, I say to Him, "Thank You so much that I've never known what it means to truly be hungry."

But maybe I do know.

To have just one day where I do everything right? I know what it's like to be hungry for that. I yearn to be able to lift my head up from shame.

Jesus tells me that I am blessed if I live in this hunger, and He makes me a promise: *You will be filled. This voracious desire to do everything right will be satisfied.*

In her book *Living Fellowship*, Dr. Helen Roseveare says:

We are created to be containers.

Containers need to be filled, if they are to function. God's plan was that we should be filled with His Holy Spirit and so reveal godliness. This demands that we agree to be emptied of self first, so as to be filled with Him.

We do not seek to be self-confident, only to be empty, available containers.

So I wrote a book about my emptiness, about my hunger to be righteous, and as I scratched out my story, I saw evidence that, little by little, God has been fulfilling my desire to be good and to do what is right.

He is slowly making me blameless by filling my empty places.

And the same promise is for you. **If you struggle with fear of failing and you have an appetite to become a person who does what is right, there is great hope.** Jesus came to make you blameless, and as you take your hunger to Him, He will satisfy you. Walk closely with Him, and you will make progress to become a better person every day.

Come away from your shame, and begin to experience the blameless life Jesus has always intended for you.

5 Reasons You Shouldn't Make Fun of Worship

The videos probably pop up in your Facebook timeline every now

and then.

You know the ones I'm talking about. Making fun of how people raise their hands in church. Cracking jokes at the simple worship songs of the '80s. Poking fun at how repetitive worship songs are today.

Christians are easy targets it seems, even among their peers because even Christians take cheap shots at Christians. And while it's perhaps harmless to tell a "how many pastors does it take to change a light bulb" joke, there is a point where it all goes too far.

There are some things that should be off limits.

There was a term that was often used long ago to define this. It was "sacrilege." Sacrilege basically means that we have taken what is holy and made it common, we've defiled it, we've mistreated it, we've desecrated it; and we'd do well to reintroduce it to our vocabulary because while we'd look at certain sitcoms and comedians and immediately recognize that they've committed sacrilege, there are times when we don't realize that we do the same.

5 Reasons We Should Never Make Fun of Worship

1. It Offends God – Worship is an expression God created for mankind as a way to fully and intimately convey the depth of our love to Him. It is as intimate as a man loving his wife or a woman loving her husband. To presume that we have the freedom to invade another person's intimate expression of worship, whether it be their physical expression of worship (*how they clap their hands, how they raise their hands*) or their creative expression of worship through lyrics or music, is offensive to God because that worship expression was a sincere act of an individual to convey the depth of

their love to God, and it was fully received by God with joy. Furthermore, that expression of worship was glorification of God and exaltation of God. It honored Him. It revered Him. It elevated Him above everything else that person loved, honored and revered. To take that act of glorification and honor and desecrate with humor is offensive to God. **It offends God.**

2. It Desecrates Worship – Desecration of worship is a very serious thing, and God takes it seriously. We read in the Old Testament about two men—Nadab and Abihu—who dared to offer a “profane fire” to God. The fire of God went out from the censers and devoured them. God is a jealous God. He said, *“I will be sanctified by those who come near Me; and before all the people I will be glorified”* (Lev. 10:3). To make fun of worship is to desecrate it. We fail to regard God as holy and to glorify Him when we take acts of worship that He has created and make them into a punchline.

3. It Distracts Us – OK, so we didn’t realize how offensive it was to God for us to laugh along with the Christian comedian who poked fun at the way people raise their hands in worship. But Sunday rolls around, we sit in our favorite chair and the music starts. As people around us begin to worship, we suddenly notice how funny they look as they raise their hands at various angles, and we find it hard to enter into worship because all we can think of now is the silly video we watched the other day and how funny the comedian looked imitating how people raise their hands.

4. It Distracts Others – But what about those who overhear us laughing and talking about the funny hand raising, how idiotic it is to clap on the “1 & 3,” how only cool people clap on the “2 & 4” or how lame it is to sing those old worship songs? Now when they enter God’s presence, they no longer feel the freedom they used to feel. They can’t just let go of their inhibitions and worship because they feel like they are the center of someone’s attention who is going to make them the brunt of a joke later on. Now all they can think about it is,

“What do I look like when I raise my hands?” “Oh my word, am I the totally uncool person clapping on the 1 & 3? What is a 1 & 3?” “I know this song is not popular anymore, but I really love it. Am I going to look old-fashioned if I still worship to an old song?” Inhibitions that were never there before suddenly distract as people realize that their privacy has been invaded by people who dared to desecrate that which was holy and intimate.

5. It Reveals a Cold Heart – When our heart burns with a love for the Lord, we enjoy a closeness and intimacy with Him that allows us to feel the joy He feels and the pain He feels. Truly, the Holy Spirit inside of us will send warning signals when something is offensive to God. Some people call this “a check in my spirit.” But whatever you call it, you feel something is off, something’s not right. It is when our heart has grown cold and distant that we can no longer sense that “check.” We can’t tell when something’s off because our cold and distant heart no longer senses the Holy Spirit’s warnings.

When we can easily entertain comedy that desecrates the holy, that makes fun of worship songs, that changes their words to say something silly, that makes lists of worship songs that are “in” and “out” giving us the freedom to show disdain for the ones that are “out” or makes people’s intimate acts of worship a punchline, when we can laugh at this and not feel how deeply it offends God, we can be sure our heart has grown cold. {eoa}

Rosilind Jukic, a Pacific Northwest native, is a missionary living in Croatia and married to her Bosnian hero. Together they live with their two active boys where she enjoys fruity candles, good coffee and a hot cup of herbal tea on a blustery fall evening. Her passion for writing led her to author her best-selling book *The Missional Handbook*. At *A Little R & R* she encourages women to find contentment in what God created them to be. You can also find her at *Missional Call* where she shares her passion for local and global missions. She can also

be found at on a regular basis. You can follow her on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Google +.

Do Your Thoughts Smell Like Rotten Eggs?

I was fixing eggs and sausage for a late Sunday night supper when the most disgusting thing happened. I cracked an egg carefully checking to make sure it was good before adding it to the bowl. All of a sudden in my hand dropped a black gooey, stinky glob. I screamed and dropped the rotten egg into the nearby carton.

No More Eggs

Needless to say, I wasn't hungry for eggs any more, or ever again for quite some time. Since the other eggs weren't affected, I figured I'd continue making eggs for the guys. And then, it happened again.

My friend had started raising chickens and had an overabundance of eggs. The two dozen we'd already eaten were delicious. There's just a difference between really fresh eggs and store bought. Maybe fresh was the problem. I'd had these several weeks and they weren't refrigerated.

100% Girl

I knew at that point, more than ever before, I am 100 percent girl. I can't stand dead animals, rotten garbage, festering boils, maggots, mice or roaches—oh and snakes. I don't like snakes either, but it's interesting that snakes seem to like all the other disgusting stuff in life.

I was glad I had the egg carton handy and was able to dump the sickening stuff in there after scrubbing my hands with Lysol and bleach! I threw away another egg that just looked kind of gray, like maybe it had black inside, too.

Good thing the garbage men were coming the next morning.

Stuff Festering Inside

Here's my point. We all have disgusting stuff festering inside of us. When that rotten egg fell into my hand that was the first thing I thought of. Here was a normal looking egg. It looked like all the other eggs. I really could not tell it apart, until it began to be used for its intended purpose and then the truth came out.

Sometimes when we are trying to do something right, it feels like we're wading through muck, mire and garbage to try to do a simple thing like stick to an eating plan, stop smoking, stop yelling at the kids or the wife or husband, stop lying, stop gossiping, stop overspending.

We make an intelligent decision to get to work on time, and that week we're late every day. It's like someone has thrown a rotten, dead egg in our face and we can't figure out what's going on. We feel we just can't go forward. We have stinking thinking.

Bacteria Inside

The most probable cause of the black inside the eggs was bacteria or fungus. That little spot of bacteria ruined the entire egg. It wasn't the egg's fault. It was probably the hen who inadvertently spoiled the egg.

We harbor feelings and thoughts that stop us, things like anger, sadness, fear, shame, despair . Sure, you're an adult now. You understand people in your life didn't mean to set those up inside you as a little kid. You've stuffed the hurt

feelings away in a closet and shut the door, but they are still there because you have no idea what to do with them. They are thoughts and feelings that stink up your life.

No matter how large or small, if left to fester they will grow into full blown death inside of us, a black gooey substance only a snake would devour (see John 10:10, NLT).

He tries to do just that until it feels like he sucks the life right out of us.

What Can We Do?

What can we do? Let's go back to the root of our problem and discover how and why we can't go forward. Let's choose to forgive those who mistreated us, lied to us, made us feel ashamed, didn't protect us or made us feel alone. Let's discard the stinking thinking which is comprised of lies and tap into God's truth. Let's let Him clean us up from the inside out (see Rom. 12:1-2, MSG).

The lies we believe are like rottenness inside of us. The blackness will always surprise us when it surfaces. Instead of stuffing it back inside so no one can see it or smell it, let's deal with it as fast as we can. Throw it out. Get rid of it. The only way to do that is to figure out where it began and start to take out the garbage it has created in us.

Don't let that old snake suck the life out of you (see Rev. 12:9, 20:2, AMP). Run to Jesus with your garbage. We can hand Him our black, slimy, disgusting rottenness. In exchange He will give us light, beauty and divine destiny, greater than we "could ever imagine or guess or request in our wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, His Spirit deeply and gently within us" (Eph. 3:20, MSG).

I'll take that over fighting off snakes any day.

Why can't I lose weight? Why do I lose weight only to gain it

back again? Am I broken? Can I be fixed? We'll deal with these issues and more in #KickWeight. Of course we'll deal with how you eat and why you should move, too. But I promise, you will never look at weight loss the same again. I'll give you the tools it takes to lose weight and keep it off. This low-cost, six-month coaching class begins April 1. Get in now. Doors close April 2. Class members are already introducing themselves. Go [HERE](#) to join them.

Teresa Shields Parker is a spiritual coach, speaker and author of three books. Her newest is *Sweet Freedom: Losing Weight and Keeping It Off with God's Help*. Her first book, *Sweet Grace: How I Lost 250 Pounds* is still number in *Christian Weight Loss Memoirs* on Amazon. Free Chapters of all her books, as well as a FREE 10-video Course #KickSugar are available on her website, .

Why You Need Light to Shine in Your Darkness

A woman in her late 50s sat before me ready to tell her story. Her hands shook as she spoke. "My mother was bi-polar and an alcoholic. If I didn't do something she asked right away, she'd hold my hands over the stove and when I screamed in pain, she'd jerk me by the hair and make me kneel on rice."

Her eyes took on a far away look. "I always thought it was normal. That most parents punished kids this way." She took a tissue and wiped the tears as they fell. "Until I was in high school and snuck to a friend's house. We were never allowed over to spend time at our friend's homes. Maybe she didn't want me to see the real love between a parent and child."

The more she spoke the worse the memories revealed. "She made me sit at the dinner table with my youngest brother's soiled underwear on my head because I wasn't around to help him to the bathroom. The worst was when all four of us [children] were outside doing yard work and I accidentally broke the rake. She pulled my pants and panties down, exposing me and made me sit on the couch for an hour." She looked up at me and her face went from crimson red to white. "I was twelve and just beginning to develop."

It is difficult to hear of such abuse done by anyone, let alone by a parent to a child. Most children grow up never speaking of this type of treatment because they carry the shame of deserving the treatment or feel bound by the familial tie.

When this woman continued to speak she revealed, rather matter-of-fact, that an uncle had come into the picture who would often force her to give oral sex.

She sighed with resignation. "I didn't say anything because I felt as if it was more punishment."

April is Child Abuse Prevention and Sexual Assault Awareness month. According to a Child Maltreatment report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau, 60,956 cases of child sexual abuse were reported in the United States in 2013.

On top of the guilt and shame that abuse can bring, when victims know their attackers it leads them to be silent about their traumatic experience. Staying silent, however, does not lead to healing. A victim's silence allows the abuse to carry on through the family and often into the next generation.

Both sexual assault and child abuse are so devastating and unfathomable to acknowledge its presence in our society would be an admittance of ignorance to what can be happening next door, or even in our own homes.

This makes it difficult for any victim of assault or abuse to feel comfortable enough to speak out, which is exactly what they need to be able to do. Be it a child, a teenager or an adult, anyone who has been abused needs to be able to speak about what has been done to them without question or judgment.

Take my personal story for instance. My mother was sexually abused by her father from when she was 2 years old to 10 years old. The abuse stopped when she started her menstrual cycle. Her mother knew of the abuse and, instead of leaving the home and committing her husband, she had four other boys in the home that needed her attention, so she ignored what was being done to her own daughter. My mother never spoke of the abuse to friends and in order to survive she tucked the dark secret away in the back of her mind, as most victims learn to do in order to survive.

My mother left that home the moment she had an opportunity and married a physically and emotionally abusive man. With a daughter and son only 17 months apart, at the age of 22 she left the marriage.

Years later she married my father and had me and my younger sister. We lived a fairly normal life except my older sister was troubled, involved in drugs at the age of 13 and sexually active. My parents put my sister in counseling trying to get her to talk about what seemed to trouble her spirit and she would not tell.

It wasn't until I confessed that I'd been raped in high school and again in college that my mother divulged her dark secret.

"It was grandpa wasn't it?" I remember knowing exactly who she was talking about when she said she'd been sexually abused as a child.

"How did you know?" she asked.

And for reasons I can't explain I shut the lid to whatever memories I had put into my own dark place. "I don't know, I just guessed." I lied. I had kept the rapes that happened to me a secret for so long having the wounds of them gaping in the open was enough for me to handle at the moment.

It wasn't long before my mom's confession that my older sister came forward and finally spoke of the abuse she had incurred at the hands of our grandfather. I still wouldn't speak. Some secrets are buried too deep.

At the age of 40 my walls crumbled and the memories flooded back like a nightmare invading my peaceful life. I had always known but held back by shame, fear of the memories, and even a hint of personal disbelief. I didn't want to admit that he had infiltrated the entire family. He was a man I loved and adored who harbored a monster inside his soul.

I have forgiven my mother for not speaking up sooner. She had repressed her own nightmare for so long, desperate to want the normal family without the stigma of abuse. As many survivors I've come in contact with they believe it was only happening to them. They had done something wrong, or instigated the abuse.

When we break the seal of silence, we shatter the illusion and save lives. Bringing awareness to the devastating reality of abuse, in all forms – sexual, physical, verbal, mental, and emotional – we allow the generation today and the ones to come to realize these behaviors are not normal and not to be tolerated. Allowing survivors to have a voice and speak of their past abuse without shame also empowers the generations to speak up.

No matter what age you are or at what point the abuse occurred, I encourage you to find a safe person to speak to, a family member, friend, minister, priest, or therapist.

As Paul encouraged Christians in Ephesus, revealing what's

been done to us 'in secret' brings us out of the darkness and into Christ's healing light.

"Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them, for it is shameful even to mention the things done by them in secret; but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says: 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light'" (Eph. 5:11-14).

Shannon M. Deitz is an award-winning author and speaker, recently listed as one of the best authors in Houston by CBS Houston Radio. For more information about Shannon Deitz and Hopeful Hearts Ministry, please visit .

When Life Looks Dreary

On the corner of Reserve and Whitefish Stage, I took a right and passed by a pristine, sapphire-blue Mustang. I was driving my dirty, dented Mitsubishi Gallant. In the few seconds that it took to pass, I evaluated my life and found myself gloating over the other driver.

"My life is better than yours, Mustang Man," I said out loud.

Because in the hours before hopping in my car, I had stood at my computer, with one task in front of me. My publisher wanted me to add two more chapters to the book I've written about my dad (a second book coming in June – how crazy is that?) I had been procrastinating, because it was painful to sit and think about Dad. I miss him. But I had prayed over the work, and a few friends had been praying, that the Lord would help me.

So I started typing and came up with two more rich vignettes

to add to the collection. I could feel the Lord guiding my thoughts and comforting my heart. I think these are going to be some of the most special stories in the book.

God's provision of words was a worshipful experience for me. I will never get over **the wonder of God's intimate care for us** – that we can pray, and He will help.

In Nahum 1:7, we read:

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.

When I got in the car to go church, I was feeling special and well cared for. I was a V8 engine and sapphire blue on the inside. *The Lord is good*, I was thinking, and I'm pretty sure that gave me the same look of cool confidence Mustang Man was sporting.

You want to feel good about your life? Let God in on the details of your existence. Trust him, and see if it's not a sweet ride.

When Your Friend's Healing Doesn't Manifest

How do you encourage the faith of someone that has been waiting for a long time for healing to manifest?

Depending upon how well you know the person, I would suggest that you spend time with this person and listen carefully to what he is actually saying concerning healing. Let him talk from the depth of his heart about life and healing. By

listening to him and to the leading of the Holy Spirit carefully, you will be able to tell what is blocking this friend's healing from manifesting.

Usually, if a long period of time has passed, they are discouraged, and somewhere along the line, they have entered into the realm of doubt and are in need of teaching that God is able and willing to heal them. Most of the time, we are not even aware of doubt.

Or it may be a pain issue, in this case, the person needs to be encouraged and taught from the Bible how to overcome the realm of the five senses, while they activate their faith.

It could be that this person has had a very difficult life, and there is a root of bitterness that needs to be pulled out from them. Perhaps depression has set in, or they have accepted Satan's lie that they are not worthy to be loved by God, and therefore, cannot receive His goodness, such as supernatural healing.

These individuals need to learn how to forgive, trust God and move forward in life. The only way this can be done is that they first make the quality decision to move forward with God.

Second, they need to be taught how to recognize the truth of God's Word, from the lie of Satan. And learn to do as 2 Corinthians 10:5 instructs us, "casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ," They need to be disciplined in God's Word so that they can heal and be made whole.

These are just a few hindrances that can block faith for healing when it tarries. What we, as an encourager need to do is be quiet, and learn to listen to the hurting individual and for the direction of the Holy Spirit for the root of the problem, and minister to the hurting along these lines. Usually, these individuals need to start their healing process

over again, and this time be trained properly in the Word concerning healing. {eoa}

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Do You Make This Mistake When You Pray?

It didn't used to matter to me whether the Awana kids said the question or if I did. I figured the important part of their handbook time on Wednesdays was if they could state the truth they were learning and then recite from memory the Bible verse to support that truth.

But then I considered the point made by Paul David Tripp, in *Instruments in the Redeemer's hands*, that often people get bad answers to their life questions because their questions are bad to begin with.

So now I'm that mean Awana teacher who insists the kids begin their recitation with the question.

"It's a kind of learning called a catechism," I tell them, "in which you say the question and then give the answer," Quickly I try to explain how important good questions are, before their eyes glaze over and they're like, *Yeah, yeah, lady. Just listen to my verses, will ya?*

The kids don't understand, because they weren't there the day the squall came up.

Waves started to come over the edge of the boat, until everyone was sure they were about to die. So the woke up Jesus, who was asleep in the stern, and asked him a question.

QUESTION: *Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?
(Mark 4:38, MEV)*

ANSWER: *Jesus must not care or He wouldn't be sleeping. He wouldn't be doing nothing.*

My Awana kids weren't there to see Jesus calm the storm by speaking to it. They weren't there to hear the disciples scolded.

Scolded for what?

Scolded for asking a faulty question that was devoid of faith.

So let's imagine that the disciples had taken care to formulate an excellent question, the way a teenager does when he wants to borrow your car keys. Let's imagine the disciples had asked something that had caused Jesus to say, "Wow, guys, because of your amazing show of faith, watch this." And then he would turn to the waves and tells them to be quiet.

I have in my mind the question they would have asked, but I'm not going to tell you.

As an exercise in good question asking, I want you to write down what you think they should have asked, either in the comment section below or privately on a piece of notepaper. Be thoughtful. What question would have pleased Jesus?

And then let's consider our own lives. Certainly **we all are asking questions about what we're experiencing**, but are they good questions that please the Lord with our faith?

9 Signs of a Toxic Friendship

It was inevitable.

I would walk away from a conversation happy and bubbly, but then the moment would hit.

Panic. Disappointment. Self-loathing.

“Why did you say that? What must they think of you! You always say such stupid things. They will probably tell everyone they know what an idiot you are!”

These horrible thoughts would flood my heart as the joy I had felt moments before slowly vanished in the thick cloud of depression that would settle over me.

To be sure, no one but me was to blame for my horrible insecurity. I would feed on these thoughts, send frantic text messages apologizing for whatever it was that I had said. I was a toxic friend.

However, there was another element in my life that contributed to this battle I waged in my mind.

Other toxic people I had allowed in my inner circle. Toxic people often attract toxic people!

My inner circle was filled with people who fed this negativity with their own judgmental attitudes, pessimism and gossip. And I entertained it all.

I listened to their judgmental declarations, pessimistic viewpoints and gossip, and then lived in fear that one day I would be the topic of conversation.

The fear was so real that I could almost feel the condemnation in their eyes.

This is what happens when we surround ourselves with toxic people!

And it is true that those who gossip to us will one day gossip about us.

So how can we know if we are a toxic friend, or have toxic people in our lives and how to deal with those toxic people? Today I share with you nine traits of a toxic friendship, and on Monday, we will look at how to deal with toxic people in our lives.

9 Traits of a Toxic Friendship

1. Your friend demands your trust. Simply put, trust cannot be demanded: despite position or title. Trust must be earned. One can have respect for a position without respect for the person who fills that position, but this respect is still not considered trust. Trust is earned based on one's ability to be trustworthy, and a friend who demands your trust is not trustworthy. A healthy friend will never demand your trust.

2. You don't leave feeling encouraged and inspired. Does time with this friend make you feel depressed, pessimistic, defensive, belittled, used or inadequate? Do you often feel like you are treated like a child when you're around them? Healthy friendships should encourage and build us up. The type of behavior that leaves you with negative feelings should be an indicator that some boundaries are needed and this person is not someone who should be allowed in your inner circle.

3. Your friend often mocks others. Mocking is a clear sign of toxicity. A person who mocks is simply not a healthy person to be around. Sometimes mocking isn't always very clear, so pay attention to the way your friend talks about others. Is it with honor and respect, or do they put others down with little

comments, slights or a laugh? If so, this person is not a person to be trusted.

4. Your friend is a gossip. Remember what I said earlier? Those who gossip to you will eventually gossip about you. Beware of a friendship that feeds on gossip because it will eventually self-destruct. Besides, the Bible calls gossip an abomination. If your friend betrays confidential conversations or shares with you information that you know was not meant to be public, you can be 100 percent certain that your friend is a toxic friend. A healthy person is a fierce protector of their other friendships ... and of yours!

5. Your friend is jealous and controlling. There are some people who want to keep a friendship all to themselves because they fear that if you have other friends, you will eventually abandon them. Usually this fear will drive them to be jealous and controlling of the time you spend with others. While, to some, jealousy may seem flattering at first, it will blossom until they smother you with exclusivity. Beware of a person who wants you to be their exclusive friend. A healthy person will encourage you to build friendships with those around you.

6. Your friend is defensive. The Bible says that a true friendship is like iron sharpening iron. Now, this doesn't mean that friendship should be based on confrontation. That's unhealthy. But in every friendship confrontation will eventually take place because no one is perfect. The blessing of a friendship-confrontation is that a healthy friend confronts in love and always has our best interest at heart. If "truth in love" is met with a defensive attitude—and consistently so—then this is not a healthy friendship. A healthy person is someone who is able to take confrontation and process it because they are humble enough to recognize their own imperfections. A toxic person is not willing to own up to their faults when confronted.

The dichotomy here is that often a toxic person is self-

loathing and will make a joke of their own faults because they are able to make themselves the butt of their own jokes, but the toxicity is evident when someone else brings up a fault and is met with a defensive attitude.

7. Your friend must always be right. If your friend leaves no room to for error, they are not a person you want to spend a significant amount of time around. We all know that no one can be right 100 percent of the time, but a toxic person leaves no room for error in their life, because being wrong will demand they admit that someone else is possibly better than they are. This is not acceptable because a toxic person must always be best.

8 Your friend lies. Obviously you cannot trust someone who lies. And if your friend lies they are not trustworthy. A toxic person will often lie so as not to appear to be imperfect; because as I said earlier, a toxic person must always be the best. So they will often cover up their failures with lies. This person has no place in your inner circle.

9. Your friend only talks about their own problems. If your friend has no interest in talking about you, or getting to know you, then he or she is not a person you want to make an investment in. A toxic person is always ready for someone to invest in them, their dreams, their visions, their ambitions, but when it comes time for them to invest in someone else, they are suddenly AWOL. If your friend either neglects reaching out to you, or is suspiciously absent when it comes to investing in you, your dreams, your visions and your ambitions, it's time to rethink your friendship.

Learn more about toxic friendships and how to choose safe people for your inner circle in this excellent book: