

Breaking Free From the Spirit of Inferiority

I grew up in the South, where football is a religion. Every boy I knew dreamed of becoming a star quarterback. When my relatives gathered for meals, the conversation usually revolved around whether Auburn would beat Alabama this year.

I felt like sliding under my chair during those moments. I was not a football player—and there was no chance of me becoming one. I didn't have big enough biceps to throw a 50-yard pass, and I didn't have the frame to tackle a 200-pound guy. I felt like a total wimp. I assumed that when God handed out physical talents, I was stuck at the back of the line.

Thankfully my lack of athletic skills didn't cripple me entirely. I had other abilities, like writing—and I ended up being the editor of my high school yearbook. But a cloud of inferiority followed me everywhere. No matter how successful I was in other areas, I branded myself a failure because I didn't measure up as an athlete.

It was only through the power of the Holy Spirit that I eventually overcame this painful sense of disqualification. But now I meet people every day who are slaves of inferiority. Some feel intellectually challenged; some struggle with a physical disability; others are terrified of speaking publicly because they are insecure about their appearance or weight. Others were bullied or abused, and the cruel words they heard on a playground or at the dinner table were stamped into their brains with a hot iron.

What about you? Do you find it difficult to describe your positive qualities? Are you haunted by labels that were pinned on you by parents, siblings, teachers or classmates? Were you ever called "stupid," "fatso," "dunce," "dork," "lazy,"

“slut,” “queer” or the N-word? Words are like knives, and they can leave permanent scars. If inferiority is hindering you in your relationship with God and others, consider taking this journey toward healing:

1. Let God change your self-image. The Bible is full of stories of insecure people who ended up doing heroic things. God loves to use “powerless” people “to shame those who are powerful” (1 Cor. 1:27, NLT). Sarah was barren, yet God called her a mother of nations. Moses was a stutterer, yet God called him to confront Pharaoh. David was an embarrassment to his father before he became a king. If you feel inferior, you are in good company!

2. Bury the lies you’ve believed. False beliefs will not collapse without a fight. You must identify the lies you believe about yourself, and then renounce them. This is not something you can do alone; you must be willing to talk about your inferiority with a counselor, a pastor or trusted friends.

When I was in my 20s, I asked two friends to pray with me because I felt so inferior. This deep insecurity made me shy and fearful, but I wanted to be confident so that I could grow spiritually and discover my calling. That prayer meeting put me on a path toward full-time ministry that has taken me to 30 nations! I would have stayed in my prison of insecurity if those men had not helped me see that God had something important for me to do with my life.

3. Confess your new identity. Gideon felt like a weakling when the angel of the Lord came to him and announced: “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior!” (Judges 6:12). At that point, Gideon was looking around and wondering, *Who is this guy talking to?* He did not believe he was a warrior! Yet God redefined Gideon’s identity and eventually changed his name to Jerubbaal, which means (my paraphrase) “The devil is in trouble.”

But it is not enough to simply believe in your heart that you are God's chosen instrument. You must boldly proclaim who you are now. Joel 3:10 declares: "Let the weak say, 'I am a mighty man.'" You must say it! If you were told you are a failure, say: "I am more than a conqueror." If you were told that you are fat and ugly, say: "I am my Beloved's, and His desire is for me" (Song 7:10). And keep saying it until you believe it!

4. Stop comparing yourself with others. At the core of sinful human nature is the desire to have what isn't ours. That's why one of the commandments God gave Moses was "Do not covet" (Ex. 20:17). We live in a culture that celebrates perfect beauty, athleticism, celebrity and wealth—and our media constantly reminds us of what we don't have by bombarding us with images (actually they are idols) of "perfect" people. Don't let those idols control you!

The media doesn't set the standard for us—God does. Instead of focusing on what you aren't, celebrate who God made you to be. If I had spent my life lamenting the fact that I couldn't make the football team, I would have never discovered the other talents God gave me.

5. Be filled with the Holy Spirit. You can never overcome mental strongholds of worthlessness and inferiority in your own strength. It is the Holy Spirit who changes us. Just as He convicts us of sin and purifies our motives, He also strips away the lies we have believed about ourselves and heals us from the words and experiences that crippled us. Ask Him to fill you so full that those lies can't hang around any longer.

If inferiority has gripped your soul, you can say this prayer now: *"Lord, You are more powerful than any label that has ever been put on me. I renounce the lies that I have believed about myself. I am not weak; I am strong in You. I am not stupid; I have Your wisdom. I am not worthless; You died on the cross to redeem me. Thank You that because I am in Christ, I am a new creation. I am not bound by my old identity—I have a new*

identity in Jesus. Help me to see myself the way You see me—as Your beloved child and as a powerful, anointed, gifted disciple. Amen.

3 Reasons the Transgender Movement Makes No Sense

My friends, Adrian and Nakia, sponsored a party in their home in May to announce the sex of their baby. Everyone was in suspense until the proud couple revealed the results of the ultrasound test. They opened a big box and three blue balloons popped out. Surprise! It's a boy! Everyone cheered.

Every day expectant couples celebrate when they discover the gender of their unborn babies. Yet today we have educators, psychiatrists and politicians who believe it is wrong to label children boys or girls. Our culture has gone crazy.

One school district in Charlotte, North Carolina, has recommended that principals and counselors simply refer to children as "students" or "scholars" instead of using gender-specific terms. The rationale suggests that calling a sixth-grade boy a boy could result in "bullying" if he decides to "identify" as a girl. Instead of helping this troubled child embrace his masculinity, we are supposed to encourage him to explore his "options" and point him down a path of transgender confusion.

Educated people with lots of letters after their names are coming up with these absurd policies, and the pressure is on to totally change the way we label gender. Instead of the traditional options of male and female that have worked well for human beings for thousands of years, we now have a rainbow

of choices: Transgender, bigender, gender fluid and genderqueer. Facebook offers its users 58 different ways to describe a person's gender, including "neither" and "intersex."

Sound crazy? Don't you dare question it. We are expected to accept this unorthodox attitude because it's progressively "inclusive." And if you challenge the transgender movement—or dare to label gender confusion as a psychological disorder—you will be demonized as a cruel hater.

It's time for rational people to cry foul before this lunacy gains more traction. This is not just an attack on family values; it's an attack on basic intelligence. Here are three simple reasons the "logic" of transgender activists is faulty:

1. Gender is a biological reality, not just an emotional feeling. Last year an Oregon woman named Rachel Dolezal was exposed as a fraud because she claimed she was African-American even though she was born to white parents. Dolezal even became a local leader of the NAACP until her elaborate scam unraveled. She told NBC's Matt Lauer: "I identify as black." But she was laughed off the national stage because everybody knows you can't change your race just because you want to. DNA determines race. You can't "become" black.

So why don't we apply the same scientific standard to gender? Today's code of political correctness says if you were born a woman but you now "feel" you are a man, you can use the men's restroom and change your official gender identity. But if a woman can "become" a man, what's next? Someone will decide they want to defy the laws of science and change from human to some species of animal.

2. Gender must be affirmed. I don't know what people are smoking these days, but something has clouded the judgment of educators who think children should be encouraged to "explore" their gender possibilities. While gender is genetically

inborn, a boy must be trained to be a man, and a girl must be trained to be a woman. Parents play a huge role in developing gender identity in their children.

We live in a fallen world, thus people are susceptible to gender confusion. Sexual abuse, bullying, shaming, lack of parental nurture and many other factors can cause a child or a teenager to question their maleness or femaleness. Yet if a person with gender confusion gets counseling and encouragement, they can overcome their emotional scars.

Proverbs 22:6 says: "Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it." The opposite is also true: If you withhold training from a child, he or she will wander in a confused state and never reach their potential. An educator who encourages a child to "explore" his or her gender options deserves an F for poor performance on the job.

3. "Gender fluidity" is a hoax. Secularists view the Bible as archaic and irrelevant, so they ignore the fact that the first chapter of Genesis says God created mankind as "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). But in the past, even non-Christians believed in what America's Founding Fathers called "the laws of nature and of nature's God." Some things are just plain obvious when you look at scientific reality.

But when people rage against God and rebel against His laws, they become really dumb. Educators today have adopted the whacky idea that gender is fluid and changeable—even though science doesn't support this. If a man decides he is really a woman "inside," he is urged to follow former athlete Bruce Jenner—who got breast implants, took hormones, started wearing makeup and became reality TV star Caitlyn Jenner. His choice is applauded by our culture, and those who say he's emotionally troubled are viewed as hateful and bigoted.

The apostle Paul wrote that intelligent people who reject

God's truth will eventually believe ridiculous things. Romans 1:22 says of them: "Professing to be wise, they became fools." I pray we will not allow our schools and communities to be hijacked by foolish people who deny God, science and common sense. {eoa}

Why I'm Not Worried About the Next Four Years

Depending on where you stand politically these days, you are either (1) enraged that billionaire Donald Trump could be our next president; (2) freaking out that former First Lady Hillary Clinton might return to the White House; or (3) dismayed that after such a divisive campaign season, we are stuck with Trump and Clinton as our only choices in November.

I'm in the third category—and so are many other Christians who find it difficult to fit in a Republican or Democratic straitjacket. I'm pro-life but I'm also pro-immigrant. I'm pro-business and against high taxes because I believe heavy-handed government control of the economy hurts rich and poor alike. I'm an avid proponent of equality for women, but I could have suggested more honest and capable women than Mrs. Clinton to become the first female U.S. president.

But it is what it is. These are our choices. For me it's like one of those nightmares where you must choose to die by guillotine or gas chamber. Either way, it's horrifying. I keep wishing we could hit a reset button and start the whole campaign season over with new candidates. But that's not going to happen.

Over the past two weeks, it has also become more obvious that,

barring some unexpected discovery of hacked e-mails, Mrs. Clinton will win in November. This is not because of anything she did but because, since the Republican convention, Mr. Trump's campaign unraveled every time he opened his mouth.

His poll numbers fell through the floor last week after he blasted the Muslim-American parents of an Army captain who was killed in Iraq. His open hostility toward a decorated war veteran caused even the staunchest Republicans to pull their support from the man who was supposed to "make America great again."

The Christian community is now deeply divided by this election. My African-American and Hispanic friends could never support Mr. Trump because of comments he made that sound racist—including his infamous plan to build a wall on the Mexican border and his original (and now modified) promise to ban Muslims from the country.

At the same time, many of my friends believe if Mrs. Clinton wins, she and her ultra-liberal cronies will launch a systematic program to confiscate all guns, shut down churches and force all American children to deny their gender. (That may be just a loony conspiracy theory, but it's no secret that Mrs. Clinton has done little to appeal to evangelical voters or to quell their fears. It's as if she doesn't want our votes.)

I've gone through a range of emotions about this election—from outrage to anxiety to hands-up-in-the-air exasperation. But I'm over it now. I've calmed down. I'm not worried.

I found the peace I was looking for last month in Bolivia, of all places.

I was speaking at Ekklesia Church, one of the largest evangelical congregations in the city of La Paz. There were more than 1,200 people jammed into that auditorium on a Sunday morning, and it was the 7 a.m. service! And at the end of my

message, several dozen people came to the altar to receive Jesus. All I could think was, *nobody would come to church at 7 a.m. in the United States!*

And yet this happened in Bolivia, a country ruled since 2006 by Evo Morales, a socialist whose policies resemble those of the late Hugo Chávez, dictator of Venezuela. In spite of Morales' leftist policies and his open disdain for Christianity (he has at times invited native spiritualists to sacrifice llamas outside his government offices) the church of Jesus Christ continues to thrive in Bolivia.

Think about it. The gospel is spreading around the world today despite civil wars, Islamic terrorism, leftwing conspiracies, rightwing conspiracies and evil tyrants. That's because regardless of who is in power at any given moment, our God is on His throne in heaven. We can rest in His sovereignty.

Perhaps you need to reflect on the fact that God is ultimately in charge of our nation and its rulers. Psalm 115:3 says: "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." When things don't go the way we think they should, we can go to sleep at night and leave our concerns in His hands. We can trust that He is at work even when it seems His enemies are winning.

Isaiah 40:23 says of God: "He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth meaningless." No candidate or political party makes God nervous. He is not wringing His hands. His sovereign plan will be accomplished in His time, and no man, woman or army can stop Him.

Lamentations 5:19 says: "You, O Lord, remain forever; Your throne endures from generation to generation." God sees the beginning and the end. His perspective is not limited like ours. He is God. And we are not!

Don't get discouraged or fearful. Instead, trust the One who rules from heaven. Rather than worrying, take your concerns to

His eternal throne and pray that He will unleash a spiritual revival in the United States that will fill our churches once again—even at 7 a.m.! That miracle can happen regardless of who occupies the White House. {eoa}

God Is Not Too Busy for Small Miracles

Two weeks ago I went to a theme park in Orlando with my spiritual son Paul, who was visiting me for my birthday. We went to SeaWorld to enjoy Manta, a roller coaster that restrains riders face down while jerking them around at 56 miles an hour. I was ready for the ride of my life, but then I did something really, really stupid.

I left my cell phone in my pocket.

When I boarded the ride I ignored the obvious sign that advises riders to place their personal items in a basket next to the track. Then, sometime after we did a 98-foot pretzel loop over a lake, I realized my phone was gone. It had been sucked out of my shorts by the force of gravity.

My whole life flashed before my eyes. All my personal information was, I assumed, now soaking in a murky Florida pond full of frogs, algae and missing flip-flops. The bored-looking teenager ushering riders out of their seats told me no lost items could be recovered until the park closed that night, but that if it would make me feel better I could file a report with Guest Services.

(He did not smile when he said this; in fact, I detected a bit of a smirk, as if he were saying, “You idiot, no one has ever

found their phone after losing it on Manta.”)

I filled out the report, and the woman at Guest Services reminded me that park workers do not check the safety nets under the coaster until 9 p.m. She did not smile, either. I had a sinking feeling that my phone was gone forever.

Yet there was a glimmer of faith in my heart, so when Paul and I had lunch in the park we prayed that somehow (an angel?) I could recover my phone. I felt almost guilty asking the Lord to help me, since I had made such a dumb mistake by not securing it. Yet a Bible verse kept coming to my mind, 1 Peter 5:7: “Cast all your care upon Him, because He cares for you.”

Paul and I even rode Manta again just to see if we could spot my phone, but that was futile. Finding a needle in a haystack is not something you do while hurtling through space at a high rate of speed. We gave up and went home. I figured I’d call the park the next day for a report.

Then, at 8:30 p.m., the phone rang at my house. It was a guy named Ray, just a random guy who had been at SeaWorld that day along with thousands of other tourists. He said he saw a cell phone in a net hanging above his head near Manta, and he and his friend climbed up and retrieved it. He used Siri to call the last number I had called, and he eventually figured out how to contact me.

My phone, he said, was waiting at Guest Services. When I drove back to SeaWorld to get it, the woman at the counter smiled. She seemed to know we had just witnessed a small miracle.

I’m sharing this story because many of us who know God cares about the big issues in our lives don’t expect Him to help us with the little things. I am sometimes tempted to think it is selfish to “bother” God with trivial matters like lost phones or misplaced keys—as if He can only respond to life-and-death situations.

If you have a hard time believing that God cares about the “insignificant” details of your life, consider Matthew 10:30, in which Jesus says: “But the very hairs of your head are numbered.” Have you considered the implications of this?

If you are a child of God, He not only knows you by name but He also knows every statistic about you, down to the number of hairs on your head. He knows what’s in your bank account. He knows your bills. He knows about your next exam at school and your next project deadline at work. He is with you when you have a flat tire, a dead battery or a missing pet.

God is in the details. Even though He is big and majestic and supremely holy, He is also intensely present in our mundane existence. Lifeless religion says God is too busy running heaven or judging nations to care about little things; yet Jesus told a parable about a man who found his lost sheep and a woman who found her lost coin (Luke 15:1-10).

Don’t let dead religion steal the joy of knowing that God cares about every single aspect of your life. Invite Him to be present in the big things *and* the small things. His promise is: “I will do *whatever* you ask in My name” (John 14:13). He’s not skimpy with His goodness. He’s not a God of limitation. Expect to be surprised by His extravagant love.

5 Things You Should Never Listen To

My favorite Christian author, British preacher Charles Spurgeon, always told his Bible college students that a minister must never allow people’s opinions or attitudes to distract him from God’s holy assignment. Spurgeon urged his

disciples to adopt what he called “one blind eye and one deaf ear” so they would not allow people to hinder them from fulfilling their mission.

Spurgeon wrote: “We cannot shut our ears as we do our eyes, for we have no ear lids, ... yet it is possible to seal the portal of the ear so that nothing contraband will enter.”

I have learned over the years that there are certain conversations I must shut out. Words have the power to inspire, but the wrong kind of words can also derail us. And in this era of Facebook outrage—where everyone feels they must inject themselves into every argument—we must learn to switch our ears off so we don’t get pulled into a fight that’s not ours.

Today, streaming TV, unlimited texts and tweets, polarizing political debate and endless communication is shaping a generation of overreactors. But not everything requires my response. Here are five things I’m learning to tune out:

1. Other people’s offenses. Some people who were offended 25 years ago will never rest until they see justice served—and they will ask you to take sides in the trial. Stay a mile away from any such dispute, or you will get pulled into it like quicksand. Proverbs 26:17 says: “He who passes by and meddles with strife not belonging to him is like one who takes a dog by the ears.” You are not the jury, and you do not have to make a ruling on this.

2. Idle gossip. I am amazed when Christians who have experienced the forgiveness and love of Jesus rudely dissect other people with their words. When the Bible refers to “malicious gossips” (1 Tim. 3:11), the Greek word is *diabolos*, which is actually a name used for Satan because he accuses man to God. Gossip is the work of the devil, but the knives he uses to cut people into pieces look very religious!

Churches can be torn apart when people make up lies about each

other, misread motives or harbor suspicions they share as “prayer requests.” Gossips are always ready to drop a hint—about where they saw the youth pastor last weekend, about Mrs. Jones’ divorce, about Mr. Smith’s reputation or about why the pastor’s wife didn’t smile at them last Sunday. Don’t even taste the juicy morsel that a slanderer tries to serve you; tell him or her that gossip is not on your diet.

3. Secondhand criticism. I’ve tried to stay open to criticism, and my door is always open if someone needs to point out my flaws. But if I hear through the church grapevine that Mrs. Rogers didn’t like my sermon, or that Mr. Williams thinks I am too harsh, I don’t give it another thought. For one thing, the report is probably not true, and secondly, if these people want to criticize me they can do it to my face. Otherwise I don’t need to worry about every comment someone makes about me.

Years ago, revivalist Steve Hill prayed for me to have what he called “alligator skin,” because he knew I would be criticized for the things I write. Ever since then I have tried to let people’s opinions and comments roll off me, as if I had waterproof reptilian scales. You can do the same. Don’t spend a drop of emotional energy worrying about what people think about you; instead be more concerned about pleasing God.

4. False accusations. If you are in ministry, chances are you will be skewered sooner or later by someone who feels it is their spiritual duty to destroy your reputation. I have many pastor friends who have had to endure character assassination—either by Sauls (insecure leaders), Absaloms (unfaithful subordinates) or Shebas (rebellious critics). Still, I don’t feel it is my responsibility to track down every person who has a low opinion of me.

In the case of David, he trusted God to deal with those who opposed him. He did not prosecute his enemies. Don’t have such a fragile ego that you have to hunt down those who don’t like

you. Take the high road and let God use even your enemies to build your character.

5. Exotic but fruitless teachings. Finally, I have learned that I must turn a deaf ear to a great deal of popular Christian chatter that is disguised as truth. People often ask me, “What do you think of So-and-So’s prophecy about Donald Trump?” or “Did you hear the new revelation about Russia’s plans to invade Israel?” or “How do you feel about the return of the Nephilim from Genesis 6?” I always change the subject.

I’m not interested in getting on anyone’s spiritual bandwagon, and I don’t waste my breath talking about speculations, conjectures, unfounded revelations or spooky visions that have no biblical basis. Let’s keep the main thing the main thing. If it’s not about taking the gospel of Jesus to lost people, I’m shutting my ears. If we would focus on what really matters, and tune out the distractions, we’d reach the world for Christ so much faster. {eoa}

10 Things I Wish I Had Known When I Was 30

When you get to be my age, birthdays can be a bummer. I don’t really want to be reminded that I’m old. So I discovered a way to ease the pain: I surround myself with younger people. At my birthday party last week were several young guys I am mentoring. They are 30, 27, 24, 23, 22 and 20—most of them younger than my own kids.

One of my greatest passions in life is discipling the younger generation. I love it partly because the young men I mentor are so hungry for spiritual direction they literally pull it

out of me; I also love discipleship because it is indescribably fulfilling. It really is more blessed to give than to receive.

Discipleship is not just leading a Bible study or helping a person understand a dry spiritual truth. It is imparting your life—sharing the wisdom you've gained from years of personal experiences. That's what a father or mother does with their children; that's what Paul did for the Romans. He told them: "For I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, that you may be strengthened" (Rom. 1:11).

I often tell the guys I mentor: "I wish I had known this when I was your age." And they recognize the blessing of getting some wise counsel they can put into practice now. I'll share a few of those nuggets here. Feel free to pass them along to other young (or old) disciples who are eager to grow spiritually.

1. Never let your failures or flaws stop you from chasing your God-given dreams. The biggest obstacle between you and your dream is not the devil, demons, your past sins, your family dysfunction or your lack of money or opportunity. Your biggest enemy is you and the way you see yourself. You must come to see that your heavenly Father loves you (1 John 3:1) and that He wants to know you, bless you and use you.

2. Never, ever neglect the Bible. Jesus said His words provide a strong, secure foundation for life (Matt. 7:24-27). But you cannot experience that security if you treat God's Word flippantly. You need to feed on it daily. The loudest voices in our culture today tell us that the Bible is irrelevant; don't listen to them. Let God's Word become the steel framework of your life.

3. Relax! God wants you to enjoy the journey. When I was young I often got anxious about God's plans and I fretted too much. I finally learned to stop striving. I quit trying to make

things happen—and I surrendered to God’s timing, knowing that only He can bring about His will. This is true whether you are praying about marriage plans, your career, your ministry or any other desire. Don’t let anxious thoughts steal your joy.

4. Saturate your life in prayer, and never make a decision without seeking God’s guidance. Life is really a journey, and God wants to steer us every step of the way. The closer you are to the shepherd, the clearer you will hear His voice telling you to turn to the left or the right.

5. Stay filled up with the Holy Spirit. The biggest mistake we could ever make is to try to live our lives with an empty tank. Don’t ever try to follow Christ in your own strength. Let the Holy Spirit empower you. Who wants dead, lifeless, boring Christianity? Seek close fellowship with the Spirit, pray in the Spirit and pursue spiritual gifts so you can experience the supernatural realm.

6. Life is supposed to be an adventure. Never play it safe. Every true follower of Christ will come to the place that Peter did when Jesus called him out of the boat. Peter left his comfort zone and stepped onto the water. You must do the same. My biggest mistakes in life happened when I let fear of the unknown choke my faith.

7. Relationships are the key to success. The world tells us that life is about chasing fame, money, cars, houses, toys or sex. But I’ve learned that God wants us investing in people—and that is where you will find the greatest satisfaction. Material possessions can’t give lasting fulfillment, and pleasure only lasts for a moment. If you want the abundant life that Jesus promised (John 10:10), pour your life into others.

8. It’s really okay to admit your weaknesses. Most of us come to Christ in a state of bondage; we struggle with all kinds of hurts and addictions. I finally learned that God never

intended for me to deal with these issues alone. Just as we learned in the story of the Good Samaritan, we need someone else to bandage our wounds (Luke 10:30-37). True healing is found through the close friends God gives us. Open your heart to them.

9. Be as generous as possible so you can become a channel of financial blessing. When I was young I never imagined I could bless others financially. Yet even with my tiny ministry salary I began to tithe and bless people—and God multiplied my resources. Don't wait until you have lots of money to start sowing. Sow even in your season of famine and watch God release miraculous abundance.

10. Don't take your parents for granted. Because my father recently fell and incurred a serious brain injury, I'm relocating to Georgia to care for him and my mother. I'm grateful that I can spend these last years with them, but I'm wishing I had made the most of every moment we shared. You won't have your parents forever. Cherish your time with them and do everything you can to honor them as you honor Christ.
{eoa}

What I Learned About Racism From Atticus Finch

Besides the Bible, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is my favorite book in the world—and the movie version is my favorite film. That's partly because I'm a Southerner who appreciates this painfully probing look at Southern racism. I also love the novel because no one has ever made fictional characters come to life better than author Harper Lee.

Atticus Finch, the small-town Alabama lawyer who defends a black man in a rape trial in the 1930s, is a hero to me because of his courage to fight social injustice. I feel as if I know him, along with Atticus' children, Jem and Scout; their black maid, Calpurnia; their neighbors Miss Maudie and Mrs. Dubose; the mysterious Boo Radley; and Tom Robinson, the man who is falsely accused of rape in a biased culture that refused to believe a black man could ever be innocent.

I thought of Atticus Finch and Tom Robinson many times last week. I wished I could have invited them over to my house for a glass of iced tea. We would have a lot to talk about.

On July 4th we celebrated Independence Day, and then we mourned for the next few days—first because of the questionable killings of two black men, Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, in Louisiana and Minnesota, and then because of the shooting of five police officers in Dallas during a peaceful protest. Not since the 1960s has America felt such overwhelming racial tension.

As I listened to the chatter on the news and on social media last week, I couldn't help but remember Atticus' advice to his daughter. He told Scout: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."

Isn't that what we should do today? We cannot hope to rid ourselves of the spirit of racism that haunts our country until we sincerely try to understand each other.

Atticus Finch felt compassion for his black client, Tom Robinson, because he drove to Tom's house in the country and sat on his front porch and got to know his family. He saw the fear on Tom's face and heard the racial slurs he endured from local townsfolk. Atticus saw the world from Tom's perspective. Atticus' children learned the same lesson when they went to church with Calpurnia and saw how black Christians worshiped.

That's the only way we're going to end this ugly racial divide. We have to talk to each other. We have to sit on our porches together. We have to become friends and share each other's burdens. We have to worship together. Laws alone will never tear down the walls of racism. Only compassion can destroy this evil.

I was not born black so I don't understand what my black friends have experienced. I have never been stopped by a police officer and interrogated when I wasn't doing anything wrong. I have never walked into a store and felt people staring at me or treating me with suspicion. I have never had to endure racial slurs. I have never been turned down for a job interview because of my race.

But I have black and Hispanic friends who have experienced racial cruelty. I've listened to their pain. I put myself in their place. I crawled into their skin.

When will we stop being afraid of each other?

Jesus attacked the root of racism when He told the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10. He taught us that God's love requires us to stop and show compassion to people who are not from our racial background. His parable shocked his Jewish audience because Jews hated Samaritans and didn't want to go anywhere near them.

Yet in His parable Jesus put a Samaritan in a positive light. He smashed the ugly stereotypes and challenged racial pride. Then, when He ascended into heaven, Jesus told His disciples to take the gospel to Samaria (Acts 1:8)—a reminder that Christians must never let racial divisions stop them from advancing the kingdom of God.

It's true: Encoded in the Great Commission is a direct command to cross racial lines. That means we really are not obeying Christ's most serious mandate if we stay in our segregated safe zones. Christianity is not fully authentic unless it is

multiracial.

Atticus Finch was right. The only way to eradicate racism is to fight it with love. Politicians will make speeches and propose laws, and protesters will demand stricter gun control and police reform. But the stronghold of American racism won't crumble until Christians get serious about building real friendships with the people we once hated or feared. {eoa}

7 Types of Christians God Can't Use

About 17 years ago I prayed a very dangerous prayer while lying on the floor of my church near Orlando. I repeated these words from Isaiah 6:8 (MEV): "Here am I. Send me." Then I cringed. I knew God would mess me up good in order to use me to touch others for Christ.

I wanted God to use me, but I was painfully aware that we don't just go out and start a ministry on our own terms. God bends and breaks those who speak for Him. He requires full surrender. I had to let go of fears, adjust attitudes and change priorities.

It has become popular today to suggest that God can use anybody. It's true that He does not show favoritism based on race, age, gender, marital history, past failures or income status. Yet His standards have never been lowered; He only uses humble, obedient, consecrated followers.

Many Christians will never be useful in the kingdom because of mindsets or behaviors that limit the flow of the Holy Spirit or, as the apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:21 (KJV),

“frustrate the grace of God.” I don’t ever want to frustrate His grace! If you want God to use you, make sure you don’t fall into any of these categories:

1. Driver’s seat Christians. Jesus is not just our Savior; He is our Lord, and He wants to guide our decisions, direct our steps and overrule our selfish choices. There are many believers who enjoy the benefits of salvation yet they never yield control to God. If you want Him to use you, then you must slide over into the passenger seat and let Jesus drive. If you have a problem with willfulness, learn to pray: “Not my will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42, MEV).

2. Armchair critics. There are some people who roll up their sleeves and serve the Lord; there are others who make it their business to analyze and pick apart everyone who is doing God’s work. The devil is the Accuser, so if you are accusing others you are operating in the spirit of Lucifer. The Holy Spirit does not work through people who are bitter, angry or judgmental.

3. Glass-half-empty pessimists. Many Christians today are worried about what sinners are doing, and some spend hours trying to predict when the Antichrist will arise or when the world will end. Meanwhile there are other Christians who focus on winning lost people to Jesus and showing His compassion to a broken world. Who do you think will bear more spiritual fruit—the doomsday pessimist or the hopeful evangelist?

4. Carnally-minded Christians. It has become fashionable today for believers to lower the standard of moral behavior to the point that anything goes. Unmarried Christians are living together, some pastors are experimenting with adultery and some denominations have voted to sanction homosexual relationships. Don’t be fooled. Just because more and more people are jumping on this trendy bandwagon does not mean God has rewritten His eternal Word.

People who live in blatant sin cannot be instruments of the Holy Spirit. 2 Timothy 2:21 says clearly: "One who cleanses himself from these things will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, fit for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work." Our usefulness to God is based on whether we have submitted to the process of sanctification. Holiness is not an option.

5. Church dropouts. I won't win a popularity contest by saying this, but it's true: God does not use people who have turned away from the church. Today it is fashionable to bash the church; some people have even established "ministries" to lure Christians away from church and into an isolated spiritual wilderness. Most of these church-bashers are bitter because they had a bad experience with a pastor.

I have only compassion for any victim of spiritual abuse. But no one has the right to tear down the work of God just because a spiritual leader hurt him. The church is God's Plan A, and He does not have an alternative. If we are going to be used by God, we must get connected to the church and learn to flow with its God-ordained leadership.

6. Timid cowards. When Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to pioneer the church there, he exhorted him to break free from fear. He wrote: "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" (2 Tim. 1:8). Fear has the power to paralyze. All those who surrender to the call of God must bravely open their mouths, defend the faith, risk their reputation and suffer rejection—and possible persecution. If you are afraid to share the gospel, repent of your fear and ask God for holy boldness.

7. Lazy spectators. Many Christians today think following God means clocking in for a 90-minute service before driving to the lake. We read quick devotions on our smart phones and breathe short prayers during our morning commutes. But somewhere in all this 21st century stress we lost the meaning of discipleship.

If you want God to use you, you must take His call seriously and become a focused student of His Word and a passionate prayer warrior. The apostles of the first century declared: " But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Halfhearted people never changed the world. You must be devoted, committed and passionate if you want to make maximum spiritual impact.

10 Spiritual Lessons I Learned at the Gym

Six months ago I started a serious fitness plan. I had gained weight, and I was watching guys my age pack on pounds. Because I have some big dreams that will take several more years to achieve, I need to stay healthy and able to travel. So I talked to some friends about their workout routines, joined a gym and changed my eating habits.

The hard work is paying off. I've not only lost weight and gained muscle but I've learned some valuable spiritual lessons in the process. God speaks to me even while I do planks, sit-ups and bench presses! Here are 10 lessons I've learned that will help you get fit both physically and spiritually:

1. Your DIET makes all the difference. If you don't eat right, no exercise routine will benefit you. Some people talk themselves into believing if they run on a treadmill for 30 minutes they can binge on ice cream, Big Macs or bags of Doritos. Good luck with that! If you want to lose weight and add muscle you must cut the empty carbs and eat more protein and power foods.

The apostle Paul scolded the Corinthians because they wanted

spiritual “milk” instead of “solid food” (1 Cor. 3:1-2). You will not grow spiritually until you wean yourself off of spiritual fluff and start eating the meat of the Word. Bible study is hard work, but when you dig deep you will grasp revelation from the Holy Spirit.

2. Develop a PLAN for growth—and follow it. If you approach exercise haphazardly, the results will be minimal. The same is true about discipleship. Some Christians are tossed around by every wind of doctrine or every wave of trendy teaching because they have no goal. But the apostle Paul was focused. He said: “I press toward the goal to the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Your goal should be to know Jesus and to make Him known to others. Don’t get distracted.

3. To grow muscle you must RESIST. When I lift a 30-pound dumbbell or do push-ups, I am using weights or my own body weight to create resistance. The tension caused by the resistance, called hypertrophy, causes muscle fibers to expand. The “burn” you feel after exercise is evidence that your muscle is growing. The same is true in the spirit. If you resist temptation, you will grow spiritually even though it may hurt. But if you give into temptation, you will stay spiritually flabby and weak.

4. CORE exercises are vital! The best fitness instructors will tell you’ll never be truly fit if you don’t pay attention to your abdominal muscles. You may hate planks or crunches, but a healthy core is the foundation of a good physique. The same is true for you spiritually. The core of a Christian is his or her prayer life. Neglect prayer and you will lose your power. The secret of the apostle Paul’s spiritual life was 1 Thessalonians 5:17: “Pray without ceasing.”

5. You will never make progress if you aren’t CONSISTENT. Because I travel a lot, I cannot always go to a gym. So I found a fitness routine that I can use no matter where I am.

All I need is a floor, a chair and some rubber exercise cords and I can work out for an hour using body weight alone. But having this plan is useless if I don't do it four times a week. The more consistent I am, the more results I will see. Don't be a quitter. He who endures to the end will be saved!

6. VARY your exercise routine. Our body is like a computer, and it can get used to a routine if we do the same exercises week after week. Trainers recommend that you "surprise" your body by mixing up exercises. You should do the same in your spiritual training. Don't get in a religious rut. Sing a "new song" to the Lord. Be open to the new things He wants to teach you.

7. You'll make more progress if you have a COACH. When I decided to start my routine, I asked a friend from South Africa named Jabin to devise a plan for me. Jabin is an athlete who knows a lot more about fitness than I do. He not only made a plan but he showed me how to do each exercise.

A lot of Christians are trying to become disciples on their own, without a mentor. Jesus showed us the model of discipleship; He invested in His followers and then commissioned them to train others. You will grow spiritually if you have someone to help you.

8. TWO are better than one. I don't always get to exercise with a gym partner, but when I do I find that I have a better workout with better results. I push harder when someone is there to encourage me. The same is true in your walk with God. So many of us try to live the Christian life alone, yet Jesus sent out His disciples two by two. Every David needs a Jonathan to reach his full potential. Having a friend to "spot" you is a sure way to grow as a disciple.

9. Fitness requires REST. One of the first things my friend Jabin taught me about weightlifting was the importance of resting in between reps. Muscles will not grow if you push

them incessantly without breaks. Rest is a spiritual principle that was programmed into our world when God rested on the seventh day. Some people think they can get ahead by working 24/7, but work without rest only leads to burnout. In your spiritual life, take the needed time to relax, unwind, play and reflect on God's goodness.

10. God can use FAILURE to help you grow. I have another fitness coach, a pastor named Mark, who encouraged me to use the principle of "failure" in my weight lifting. He taught me that on my last set of each exercise, I should keep lifting until I can't go any more. "Lifting to failure" increases blood flow to the muscle and boosts muscle growth. It will also make you sweat!

The old gym slogan, "No pain, no gain," is also a spiritual truth. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says: "Whatever your hands find to do, do with your strength." Don't be halfhearted in serving the Lord. Throw all your energy into whatever He calls you to do, and you will reap the blessings. {eoa}

5 Toxic Attitudes You Must Allow God to Change

I was filled with the Holy Spirit 40 years ago this summer, so I wish I could say I have "arrived" at some level of Christian perfection. But the truth is that God is still working on me, sometimes with a shovel and a pickax, and other times with a bulldozer and dynamite. I have learned that the Holy Spirit, our great refiner, never stops stepping on my toes, confronting my sin and exposing my stinking attitudes.

He does this not to shame me or torture me, but to conform me

to the image of Jesus. This grueling process is what the Bible calls “sanctification”—a big, theological word that simply means God is serious about burning the junk out of my heart so I can reflect His divine nature. He doesn’t mind putting me through the fire because He knows the happy outcome. Sanctification can be painful, but the result is, according to the author of Hebrews, the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11).

When we invite Jesus into our hearts, He moves in—and He does not timidly co-exist with our sin. He is a ruthless warrior, and He goes on a loving rampage until every area of our rebellious hearts have been conquered. He slays our pride, kills our greed and shows no mercy to any sinful behavior that has controlled us. Your choice is to cooperate with this process, or to drag it out longer than necessary because you don’t want Him to meddle with your private life.

Below are five attitudes God wants to change in all of us. Bad attitudes can keep us out of our promised land. They can hinder God’s work in our lives. They can quench the Holy Spirit. If you have not yielded these attitudes to Him, let the Holy Spirit move in and begin the process of demolition.

1. Stubbornness – Some Christians approach God with hands joyfully upraised; others keep their arms defiantly crossed. Is your daily prayer: “Not my will, but Yours be done”? Or do you place strict conditions on your obedience? God wants surrender. Don’t be a stubborn foot-dragger or a Jonah who runs when God calls you. Some believers I know started out with a carefree heart of surrender, but they grew cautious and doubtful when things didn’t work out they way they expected. Quit sulking. Get back in the game, take off your parking brake and move forward with Him.

2. Negativity – Joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, but you would never know this when you are around certain Christians. They never learned to rejoice in the hard times. They never

see the silver lining around any cloud. They always expect the worst. Their faith is extinguished by fear and doubt. Jesus died on the cross so we could experience unspeakable joy. If you have carried around a heavy blanket of sadness all your life, let God exchange it for a garment of praise.

3. Self-centeredness –The essence of sin is selfishness, but this attitude should not characterize Spirit-filled Christians. When we are baptized, we become a part of the church and we learn to love each other, serve each other and esteem each other higher than ourselves. We no longer have permission to be isolated loners. The Holy Spirit teaches us to say: “It’s not about me.” Quit viewing life through your own needs. Learn to put others first.

4. Woundedness – We’ve all been hurt. But real success in life is determined not by our circumstances but by how we face them. God calls us to forgive, no matter how much pain we endured when we were betrayed, disrespected, violated or overlooked. God wants to wipe away your tears, but He can’t heal you if you hate the people who hurt you. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. Don’t wait until you have a warm, fuzzy feeling for your enemy. Make the decision to love anyway, and the feelings will come later.

5. Fault-finding – Philippians 2:14 commands us: “Do all things without murmuring and disputing” (MEV). But since the church began 2,000 years ago, there have been finger-pointers and whiners who have slowed the progress of the gospel with their petty complaints. There are 686,000 species of insects in the world, and billions of them are buzzing at the same time; in the same way there will always be critics buzzing with their latest accusations and opinions. Yet the world is not changed by insects but by people who have been transformed by Christ. Don’t join the tragic chorus of small-minded critics. Be an encourager instead.

God wants holiness. But some of us don’t realize that we can’t

have true holiness until we surrender attitudes that are contrary to His nature. It's not enough just to let go of sinful behaviors. He wants you to be like Jesus inside and out. He wants truth in the inner parts. Let Him take a sledgehammer to your bad attitudes.{eoa}