



It was a chilly November day in southern Colorado. Television screens flickered. Radios buzzed. Scandal mongers infiltrated every nook and cranny of bars and homes nationwide, spreading the word of another fallen evangelical preacher. The news media closed in on Colorado Springs like buzzards on a carcass. It was a mad frenzy to bite off as much filth as possible on this breaking story. I remember driving by the church with my family and seeing the parking lot filled with news vans, reporters and cameras.

A local male prostitute had come forward against this church leader with allegations of sexual infidelity and drug abuse. They were strong accusations of sex, lies and deception. He had sinned. The pastor later confessed—to his church and the nation—that some of the accusations against him were true, leading to his removal from the church he had founded and his resignation from prominent leadership positions. Not to mention the shame and disgrace that came with it. Families were hurt, people were crushed and lives were changed forever.

It sent shockwaves through the Christian community. It rifled through it like buckshot, sending sprays of confusion through betrayed followers. The very things this pastor spoke against, he had now been involved in. The reactions were widespread. Some were despondent and some were cold. Mingled in the two were feelings of sadness, hatred, hurt, anger, embarrassment and criticism. Americans pulled out their best fingers to point, and hypocrites everywhere arose to cast judgment on this newly exposed mega-church pastor.

Fast-forward four years.

I was boarding my return flight home after a business trip in San Diego, Cali. The flight attendant welcomed me aboard as I moved slowly along in a long line of passengers shuffling to find their seats. They stuffed their bulging carry-on bags in the overhead bins to the sounds of clicking seatbelts and rustling magazines. As I moved passed first class, I noticed him and his wife seated in the first exit row. I was on an airbus with the scandal guy. He sat quietly next to the window, watching people with a shameful, distant glance to see if they recognized him.

Something stirred in my soul. In those few short minutes I reflected on stories of Jesus hanging out with sinners. The one about the woman caught in adultery. Remember that one? The religious leaders dragged her to the center of the temple court before Jesus, ready to stone her for her actions. Moved by grace he stooped down and began scribbling in the sand. Nobody knows what he wrote with his dusty finger, but I suspect it was words like: thief, jealous, liar, arrogant, lust, cheater and envy. One by one her accusers began to walk away, until all of them had gone. As she stood there alone with Jesus he challenged her to go and sin no more. He forgave.

I thought about my own sinful history. All the selfish, ugly, mean, unspeakable things I've done in my lifetime to turn my back on God and my neighbor. I could run a Sharpie dry and fill notebook pages full of dirty deeds. The list is exhaustive and I am not exempt from sin. I've had my own share of problems, things I struggle with everyday as I try to do the journey right. Don't you? Let's be real honest with ourselves. If it's not the "big ones" like robbery, fornication, or murder, it's the so-called multi-functional everyday ones we're guilty of: lying, complaining, hate, doubt, worrying, and on and on.

I also thought about the church. Not a building but the very followers of Christ, or Christians. How we are most often the worst at forgiving and letting go. We look to accuse while holding grudges and offences and malice in our hearts. We fail shamefully at modeling the forgiveness of a God that gives second chances. I once heard someone say that we spend too much time fighting one another and polishing our own armor. It was this scandal-victim pastor I watched on the plane who said in an interview that the world had moved on, but the church still turned their backs on them. Four years later!

The decision was made. I was determined not to be one of those that passed by on the other side of the road, as somebody lay bleeding on the shoulder. So, as I approached I leaned toward him with a smile and offered a few kind words. It's not important what I said, it's important that I acted. I'm not saying that I would have lunch with the guy, and I definitely don't condone his actions. I'm just saying, as Christians, we have a biblical obligation to be the hands and feet of Jesus – to walk in the shadow of his love and to lead people to authentic freedom through the same grace that saved us.

I hope that my motives weren't selfish, that I did it more for me than I did for him. Regardless, I wanted to do my part to wipe the tarnish off of the church's name. You can do the same by refusing to be judge and jury. God is big enough to handle that on his own. If not for his grace where would any of us be? I think U2's Bono says it best: "Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff." Have we so easily forgotten that Christ lovingly stooped down and wrote in the sand for us? Let's determine not to be the ones that put those sitting on exit row, on death row.



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