

"Your God is too Safe"

Mark Buchanan

Notes by Dave Kraft

I have a BMW (beautiful marvelous wife) I had chronic spiritual fatigue, and as I looked around, it seemed the condition was epidemic (11) Why does our life in Christ so often gather moss rather than bear fruit (12) Wanting a god other than God—a god who is nice, innocuous, pampering, who forgets not our confessed sins, but our besetting ones (14) We can study the intricacies of doctrine, but lose passion; we can become eloquent at God talk, but cease talking to God (21) We are guilty of faintheartedness, half-heartedness, and fickle-heartedness. We have a fondness for parades and masquerades of holy living, but little appetite for the real thing (22) Jesus knows our drowsy indifference to matters of highest importance, our rabid passion for matters that are trivial (23)

As a pastor, I am paid to make sure it all glows and flows and steps on no one's toes (29) Upon learning that Mark was a pastor, a lady said, "Well, that's nice. I've always felt that churches serve an important role in society. They are safe havens. People should be able to go into a church and escape reality for a little while." To which Mark responded, "You know, somehow I missed all that when I last read the book of Acts." (31) It is a strange habit of ours, that we fling so widely to the extremes but rarely find the middle (32) The safe God has pretty much killed the power of recognition in us, and so when the real God comes into our midst, we mostly don't even bother to look up (33) We want a God who provides but doesn't intrude, who protects but never demands, never judges, never meddles.

We want a God who keeps His distance and doesn't crowd us. I want to be rescued but not bothered, comforted but never disrupted soothed but not disturbed (36, 39) The safe boat is a charter trip for those who want life predictable, quiet, settled, safe—who want, not to go out to the deep, wild sea, but to hug the shore. Who prefer a safe God who keeps His distance (41) what are we concerned about? Is it what God is concerned about? (50) **"You could say that many, many Christians are atheists unawares"**—Os Guinness Mark mistakenly thought his main interpretive task was to distill from the Bible principles, technique, a series of points to ponder or steps to take.

It was to compress the infinite into the numeric, corral the miraculous into the pragmatic, tidy the messy earthiness of the Bible into a neat-edged moralism, parse its poetry into prose—or worse, propositions. In short, it was to banish mystery (57) Seeing the stories of the Bible as “A Distant Mirror” (58) The worse consequence of losing our imagination, our wonder, is that we no longer see the Christ like life as an adventure. We see it as a duty, a chore, a list of dos, don'ts, and how-to's. We think the point of life is to stay as safe and undisturbed as possible (60)

Seeing the church as an Indiana Jones movie or a training video for using a certain sewing machine. Mark asked a group of teens at a camp, “When you look around at churches today, which of these videos would you say best captures the essence of the Christian life?” Every single one of them said the sewing machine training video (60) I promise to wage war on myself, defy myself, die to myself. Prayer can be a pretty, pious decoration. A hedge on the bet. The rubber stamp of providence on business as usual. A way of getting my will to be done, in heaven as it is on earth. Watching out for things in life that can crowd and clutter (75) The key is not being true to yourself, but coming to the end of yourself (78)

Mark says that he has never been in a church discipline action that has come out well (88) God's definition of *it going well* is not about life being fair, it's about acceptance. God accepting us and we accepting what God sees fit to allow in our lives. Those who walk by faith discover that life rarely gets easier. It often gets harder. Safe? Who said He was safe? Fair? Who said He was fair? (91) To experience defeat, disappointment, loss—the raw ingredients of brokenness moves us closer to being like God than victory and gain and fulfillment ever can (93)

One of the worst manifestations of pride is self-deceit. Self-deceit is the unwillingness, even the inability, to face our own evil, and if we do face it, we can't accept the real reasons for it (94) Real holiness is being naked and not being ashamed. Real holiness is coming into the light. Real holiness is telling ourselves the truth, no matter what. Real holiness is calling sin by its real name (97) We tend to simultaneously scurry and slog through breathless, breakneck schedules (100) What I need are more holidays, more holy days.

But, deeper than that, what I really need is a Christ like sense of time and timeliness and timelessness (101)

Few of us possess the inner compass, map, calendar, and clock Jesus had; there was Jesus—vigorous, yet relaxed, clear-eyed, yet dream-filled, purposeful, and yet not driven. He was active, productive, and diligent, but never busy (103) At the heart of Jesus' ministry was a holy must (104) the easy thing is to take up permanent residence in "borderland (the place between being saved and being sanctified, between coming to Christ and actually walking with Him). A place chaotically and mindlessly busy, the hectic trading house of the trivial. But if you live that way, after a while you notice that your life has nothing at its core. It has no center. There is activity. There is opinion. There is busyness. But there's nothing to give real pleasure or deep meaning to the activity, nothing to ground opinions in truth and shape them into convictions, nothing to translate busyness into fruitfulness, nothing to convert selfish ambition into holy purpose. You realize you're stuck. And you start to wonder if this is it, or were you made and called for something else? 105)

We are known by our fruits, not by our lack of tree fungus or leaf rot (110) the concept of being a charter member of the safe God society. Cleanness is about what's on the inside breaking through to the outside (113) **"How you spend your days is, of course, how you spend your life"** Annie Dillard (124) We have to train to run marathons, climb mountains, play violins. That's the most basic idea in the world. It needs no further commentary. We have to train for the spiritual life. (126) The plodding, aching persistence required to learn the practice of the presence of God. I intend to help you make the shift, huge and subtle both, by which you become fully present to the God who is, right now, right here, fully present with you. (127)

Jesus is saying; if you want to imitate me on the battlefield, imitate me in the boot camp. Holy habits are that: the disciplines, the routines by which we stay alive and focused on Him. Willpower alone is insufficient to motivate us and sustain us in living in the presence of God (131) **"Any activity I do by direct effort that will help me do what I cannot now do by direct effort"** Dallas Willard-his definition of spiritual disciplines (132) Grace and effort are not opposites. Grace and earning are opposites. There are eight NT passages that tell us because God has already given us all things,

we therefore must make every effort (188) Always lurking behind our acts of self-denial and self-discipline is the whisper and nudge of self-indulgence: *You will get the glory*. Something is wrong if you find that any discipline or habit you practice is making you arrogant, self-righteous, contemptuous, judgmental (135) The concept of breaking the gravitational pull something has on us (138) Learn to walk in continual expectancy (143) Nietzsche was wrong. We haven't killed God; we've just domesticated Him. We've made Him too safe (145) Our world is full of gimcrack and gimmicks, haste and hustle. God has become merely another appointment in a crammed Day-timer (148) If Sunday, for one hour, is the only time we worship, no wonder we do it sloppily, haltingly, hastily, and leave as hungry as we came. Robust worshipers worship in spirit and in truth. They don't need a temple. The kitchen will do. Our lives should be lived with expectancy. Not necessarily expectation. Expectancy is the belief that God will do something. Expectation insists He do it in just this way, my way (149)

This is the shape of life in the "borderland". It is maintained by a giant game of masquerade, concealment, finger pointing, blame shifting. No one is owning up to anything, coming clean with anyone (164) Confession is presenting our real self to God (166) Confession is when we quit all the deal making, the sidestepping, the mask wearing, the pretense and preening, and we get bone-deep honest before God. I am the man! In order to present our real selves to God, we need to be honest with ourselves about ourselves, and honest about ourselves to at least one other trusted and godly person (167) If anyone is going to love you, and if you are going to love anyone the way Scripture exhorts and commands, you're going to have to show someone the real you.

The real you will have to stand up. You'll need to confess. To confess is to entrust to another the deepest part of yourself—don't do that lightly (170) Unconfessed sin rots the bones. It withers and scalds our insides (171) Confession is ground clearing, getting the garbage and debris out of the way so that we can build something there. It has zero value unless you actually get on with building (172) Frederick the Great King of Prussia said to the only man who said he was guilty in the midst of other prisoners proclaiming their innocence, "Release this man immediately. I will not have this scoundrel thief kept here where he might corrupt all these other fine, virtuous, and innocent men" (174) Dead space. That's entertainment jargon, and it means

any time when nothing happens—no sound, no motion, no image. The loss of dead space in our lives is killing us, inch by noisy inch. Killing dead space is killing me. Our culture's so-called dead space is really holy ground. We're obsessed with ourselves and afraid of ourselves.

And part of that fear and that obsession—both the key symptom and the main drug that feeds it—is our need for approval (175,176) Consider the energy we expend trying to get credit for things we've done right, or trying to avoid blame for things we've done wrong. I have to stay very busy ensuring that you see me in the most heroic, humble, dignified, competent light I can cast on myself (177)

Jacob was the poster boy of the self-absorbed and the self-avoiding (179) I know that the more time I take—away from the tyranny of clock and calendar, away from the hounding demands and heavy pressures of my life—the more my mind opens to the eternal. And when I return to my normal workaday life, I go slower and somehow do more (180) It's best to speak when tempted for selfish reasons to be silent, and it's best to be silent when tempted for selfish reasons to speak. Silence is for listening. I think many of us don't listen well (182) FDR, convinced people don't really listen, said to people in a reception line, "I murdered my grandmother this mourning. With a single exception, people smiled back and responded with, you're doing a fine job, how lovely. The one exception was a foreign diplomat who said without missing a beat, "I'm sure she had it coming to her."

Silence is the room we create for the searching of God, where we hear his voice and follow. If revealing something shows me in a good light or maybe shows you in a bad light, I want to tell for pride's sake. But if revealing something shows me in a bad light or maybe shows you in too good a light, I want to keep it under wraps for pride's sake. Either we do good things in order to be seen by others, or we do them in order to bring praise to God (184) More and more people in our churches are food gluttons and biblical anorexics. Even our intake of scripture has been reduced to a kind of fast food drive through, nibbling the crumbs tossed from the pulpit on Sunday. "I left that church. They just weren't feeding me" (194)

The Ethiopian emperor Menelik II took feeding on God's word seriously. Whenever he fell ill, he'd eat actual pages from the Bible in the belief that this would cure him. He died in 1913 after ingesting the entire book of 2

Kings (199) The holy habit of study means we let the reality of scripture break in on the closed safeness of our sometimes tightly scripted piety. Let this word get down in your guts, where as often as not it gives you a stomachache. Let it disrupt you. Let it shock you, offend you, confuse you. Let it bore you, even. And by all means, let it teach and nourish and comfort you (205) Real servant hood can't exist with insecurity. I'll be driven by a quest for self-protection and self-promotion if I'm hunted by the question, do I matter? Am I important? Am I noticed? Am I valued? Am I loved? Borderland is a carnival of one-upmanship, a gauntlet of me first (214) Am I important? Infinitely. Do I matter? Ultimately. Am I loved? Completely. So you know what? I don't have to sweat and fret about having a bigger slice of pie than you, a shinier nameplate on my door, more feathers in my cap, more notches in my gunstock, more letters after my name.

I don't need anyone to pat me on the back and tell me how great I am. God's done all that and more. Now I'm free—to be your servant (215) Prayer is about being made in the likeness of Christ. Conformed, reformed, transformed. If prayer was only about getting things—getting even, getting rich, getting well, getting justice—then we would call it something else (220) Moses, Samuel, Nehemiah, Paul, seized hold with both fists and ran with all their might, but still they had to wait. They had to wait for people—stubborn people, lazy people, rebellious people, cowardly people (221) It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church, we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews (227)

I hope you want off of "Borderland" I hope you want to venture into the holy wild, with all its danger and wonder and beauty. But one thing is for sure. It will not come cheap or easy. If we are going to walk that road to Emmaus and see, hear, and rejoice in Christ who walks with us, we will have to walk, one step after the other, and we will have to watch and listen with care and with shrewdness. We will have to practice His presence. And there are not shortcuts to that, no escalators in the steep sections, no artificial removal of obstacles and annoyances. It takes discipline—the steady, daily cultivation of "holy habits." (248) So we refine an instinct for avoiding God. We perfect the art of the sidestep. We live in borderland—the place

between being saved and being sanctified, between coming to Christ and actually walking with Him.