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ESCAPE THE STRUGGLE

~~WITH~~

OF YOUR OLD LIFE

~~THAT~~

BOB MERRITT

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DAVID  COOK™

transforming lives together

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PART I



GETTING HONEST



WHAT I NEVER KNEW ABOUT THE NEW LIFE

In 2004 I reached a breaking point. Our church had grown from 350 people to over ten thousand in just twelve years. We were building buildings and adding staff; plus, the number of requests for me to teach and lead outside our church was increasing. On the outside, most would have considered us a thriving church and me a successful pastor, and by all accounts it looked that way.

But I was miserable.

The demands on my life exceeded my ability to keep up, and I was tethered to so many people and so many obligations that I felt suffocated. One day things finally caught up with me, and I needed out. Although rain poured outside, I took my canoe to a local lake and paddled out to the middle. Then with rain and tears streaming down my face, I looked up toward the sky and said out loud, “What’s wrong with me?” I was emotionally and physically exhausted.

DONE WITH THAT

The cracks became evident through my harsh comments and bursts of anger. In the office I had become a virtual recluse, sequestered behind a closed door to crank out another sermon or news article. My staff rarely approached me or even had access to me, but when they did, the tension was thick—almost explosive. If someone got hurt or offended, so what? Nobody cared. Nobody had *time* to care.

It was even worse at home. I stormed around in anger, reacting to even the smallest things with hurtful jabs and unkind gestures. The kids learned to stay clear and quietly wondered to my wife, “What’s wrong with Dad?” Between Laurie and me, there was plenty of yelling and tears, followed by days of the cold shoulder and staying out of each other’s way.

But frankly, I was blind to my problems and didn’t understand why I felt or reacted the way I did. I excused my behavior because I truly believed I was doing what God wanted. And that was true—I *was* doing what God had led me to do. Only I was doing too much of it. I was emotionally depleted and relationally dangerous, and I couldn’t recall the last time I had laughed.

What I didn’t know was that my church board was having serious behind-the-scenes conversations about my future. Until, at a board meeting one night, they told me I must get some professional help—or I was done.

I was so stunned I couldn’t speak. Has something ever made you feel that way? Something surprising, something awful happened, and it shook you to the core? I realized that those eight people held my fate in their hands, and at that moment I had a choice—either I admitted and addressed some serious flaws, or I risked losing everything I’d given my life to.

That conversation launched a yearlong intervention with a guy named Fred, who specializes in executive coaching. Fred and his team took me through every self-evaluation assessment known to man. They interviewed all my family members, most of my staff, and all my closest friends using sixty questions that asked, “What’s good about Bob, and what’s bad about Bob?”

Those they interviewed held nothing back, and some even used the opportunity to thrust and twist the dagger in as deep as they could. At the end, every comment was recorded in a two-hundred-page document and read back to me by Fred and his assistant over a two-day lockdown.

Those were the most painful two days of my life.

It was also the first time I’d received any sort of in-depth professional insight into my behavior patterns. And I know now that it saved me.

I immediately resigned some of my commitments—the heaviest being a teaching role at Bethel Seminary—and soon I began seeing the connection between my stress and my anger. I had a long way to go, and the battle wouldn’t be won immediately. But at least I was becoming more aware of my problems.

SIGNS OF HOPE

I knew I had to live and lead differently, but I was also afraid I wouldn’t be able to change. So I asked Fred how many guys like me grow and actually see transformation. He was honest: “About 40 percent. Those who succeed are humble. They not only receive the feedback but apply it to their lives.” Well, if humility was the key to change, I would do my best to take all the feedback in—and pray for grace.

DONE WITH THAT

Over the next ten years, change became noticeable, especially in how I treated people. Some of my staff even said, “What’s happened to Bob is a miracle.” My stress was lower, and my anger was under control. Instead of just blurting out the first thing that came to mind, I actually thought about my words before I spoke. And rather than criticizing people, I sought ways to compliment them. I wasn’t perfect, I still failed, but I saw my faults more quickly and owned up to them more willingly.

During those ten years, our church grew from ten thousand to twenty thousand attendees, the budget doubled, and we added four campuses, making a total of seven. None of that would have happened if I had only tried to tweak the dial and muddle through. I had to seek help, listen to my elders, follow Fred’s advice, and, lastly but most importantly, humble myself before God.

The Bible says, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble” (James 4:6). It’s not that God simply puts up with the proud or is indifferent to their arrogance, but He actively *opposes* them. But to the humble? To those who are teachable and willing? He gives grace, forgiveness, and, thankfully for me, second chances.

MORE CRACKS

So God gifted me with another chance, and our church enjoyed an amazing ten years. But then more cracks in my armor showed. Although I had genuinely improved in managing my stress, anger, and word choices, deeper, unexplored issues still wreaked havoc on our church staff. Pain signals that something is wrong. I was experiencing pain, particularly in the form of a couple of senior staff resignations and growing tension among the other staff. Candidly, I

thought I could manage it. But the church board asked whether I'd be open to another round with Fred.

I responded calmly and willingly, but inside I thought, *You gotta be kidding me. Not Fred again. I thought I was done with that.*

What I learned is *you're never done with that*. It was a huge revelation to me—you're never done growing, never done learning, never done dealing with your weaknesses.

This time Fred dug deeper into my upbringing. He had me map out, starting from my childhood, all my life experiences—those that had a positive effect and those that had a negative impact. By doing this, I started seeing where my feelings of fear, insecurity, and lack of trust originated.

For example, I had loving parents, but when I was eight years old, they traveled to Argentina for a month and farmed us five kids out to different families. One night a blizzard hit the Chicago area where we lived, but I had 120 newspapers to deliver after school. The snow piled up to my thighs, each step was a battle, and completing the route took five hours. When I was done, I stumbled into my caretakers' garage after nine at night. I was cold and crying, and they *yelled* at me. They wondered where I was, and they had called the police.

I don't remember anything else about that night or even the whole month—except feeling completely abandoned and unloved.

Then as I looked back, I also remembered moving a lot. Not only did it make life feel unstable, but each new school I attended also made me feel more alone.

I never told anyone about these things—until I met with Fred.

After I made my list, Fred took me through an evaluation grid with four quadrants: integrity, responsibility, forgiveness, and

compassion. Through seven years of extensive research, he had found that these four character qualities give a person a sense of wholeness.

To understand how I rated in these four areas, Fred sent my colleagues a questionnaire. When the results came back, I had strong scores in the areas of integrity and responsibility—but I completely failed in forgiveness and compassion. This raised a big red flag for Fred, but I kept thinking, *What do forgiveness and compassion have to do with leadership anyway?*

After that initial intervention, Fred coached me for eight more months and asked me strange questions like these:

“What was it about your dad and your upbringing that causes you to lack compassion for people today?”

Hub?

Or “Why are you so afraid to forgive yourself and others?”

What?

Or “When you discover the fuel for forgiveness, don’t you think you’ll be happier and freer?”

Come again?

I’d never heard questions like that and at first had no clue what they meant. Fred concluded that my lack of forgiveness and compassion was primarily fear driven, but I didn’t understand that. He said my fear of failure contributed to my inability to forgive myself or others, but I didn’t understand that either.

Fred pointed out how my dad modeled a lack of forgiveness and compassion. Now, I have to be clear—I loved my dad. He was faithful to my mom, family, and church, and he was a great leader. But he was pretty rigid and emotionless. He saw the world as black and white, so he had little patience for those who fell outside his

framework. And come to think of it, he wasn't very forgiving of or compassionate toward himself or others either.

Turns out, the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree, because I struggle with those same things. Like my dad I'm unusually hard on myself and others. But I'm finding that to break free from the old life of fear and insecurity, I need to be more patient with those who think differently than me, and I have to be more forgiving. It'll involve letting myself and others fail and being okay with some of it.

This is not natural for me, and I can easily flip back into my previous rigid, judgmental, unforgiving mode. But I can sense a shift in my spirit as I practice letting myself and others off the hook, and it's a wonderful thing.

In his book *Unoffendable*, Brant Hansen wrote, "Quit thinking it's up to you to police people.... Quit trying to parent the whole world.... Quit being shocked when people don't share your morality. Quit serving as judge and jury.... *It's all so exhausting.*"¹

I'm starting to get that. He wasn't saying that we shouldn't care about right and wrong but that we don't have to be so forceful with it all the time.

I still speak up when I think a staff member is wrong, and I still get upset when someone makes a decision I don't agree with. I still tell the truth and hold people accountable. That's part of being a good leader, a good person.

But now I'm working to slow down and take a more thoughtful approach. I ask more questions instead of making blanket statements. I try not to weigh in on every little decision as if my life depends on it. And I've committed to linking arms with my executive pastor more—to trust him and others to represent my heart and execute our plans and vision. At one time I gave people directives and then scurried

around the office ensuring they talked to the right people and did everything exactly as instructed. But now? I'm done with that.

WE HAVE MORE TIME THAN WE THINK

One of the most helpful insights I received during this time came from another Fred. Fred Martin, president of Disciplined Growth Investors, manages large investment accounts like government pension funds for entire states. He also leads a divorce care group at our church with his wife, Sue, and these two have become wonderful friends and mentors.

Recently Fred and I were on a two-hour drive from the airport to his Montana ranch, and I asked for his advice about a decision one of my colleagues had made recently. I was bothered by this person's choice and wanted to address it swiftly.

Fred listened intently and then said, "Bob, with most issues and decisions like this, you have a lot more time than you think."

Hub?

He waved his hands, barely able to get the words out fast enough: "If we see something we don't like or we see someone making a bad decision, we often think, *I have to go fix that right now*. We immediately shoot off an email, approach that person, and try to fix the problem *right that very moment*."

Fred looked at me and said, "Stop doing that. Do you need to call that person right now? Or is there a better time—like when you have more information? Do you have to insert yourself into every decision, or can you let other people make choices, allowing *them* to feel the satisfaction when they're right ... and the pain when they're wrong?"

I had never thought of that.

I decided to take Fred's advice. I wish I could report it was easy and freeing; it wasn't. I struggled to let the matter go and not let it bother me, but I kept thinking I should pick up the phone and make sure my colleague understood my disappointment. But I finally *did* let it go. I decided I had more time than I thought, so I surrendered the issue to God, enjoyed the week hunting elk in Montana, and then eased my way into the matter when I returned home. The issue was resolved, nobody drew blood, trust was built, and I discovered that *I have a lot more time than I think*. The Bible advises, "Be ... slow to speak and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). Slow it down. Take a walk. Step away and get some perspective. You can still come back and say what you were going to say originally. But I've found it's worth exploring whether there's a better time, place, or way to resolve the issue first.

MORE SIGNS OF GROWTH

I'm kind of a water Nazi. I don't like leaky faucets, and I don't like overflushing—so flushing bugs down the toilet is out of the question. I also think the dishwasher should be jam-packed before we run it, because there's no need to waste even a drop of water. So when my wife was on the phone the other day and failed to shut off the faucet precisely when the water reached the top of the slow cooker she was preparing to soak, I felt an urge to reach over, shut it off, and give her a condescending look. But I thought, *Give her a second. Don't be a jerk. See if you can refrain from being the correction officer.*

And guess what? She reached over and turned it off (three seconds too late in my mind, but she did it). And she never knew how I felt or what I was thinking. She didn't need to know.

DONE WITH THAT

That's spiritual growth for me.

Seriously, it is.

Spiritual maturity often gets tested in the tiny things that pop up every day. These tests come in the form of little annoyances, such as an ill-timed comment that someone makes, a misplaced phone, overstuffed drawers, annoying quirks, or cupboard doors left open. Laurie knows this to be true—she says I leave a trail of open doors and closets every day that she has to close, and it tests her patience.

It's hard to let certain things go for the sake of relationships. And as you gain more responsibility as a parent, teacher, manager, author, builder, or leader, the tests get tougher and the need for self-control becomes greater.

But the alternative is to stay stuck. Keep offending. Never improve, and fail to achieve. Let's be done with that. You and I have to break out of the old life and into the new.

What follows are two realities I never knew until recently.

YOU'RE NEVER DONE GROWING

I thought I had arrived after my first round with Fred—but then I learned you're never done growing, never done battling. On this side of heaven, we won't be able to say, "I made it, I'm a new person, and I never have to deal with sin again." In fact, the more you shine the light of God's truth on your "old life" patterns and sins, the more you see how much work still needs to be done.

It's like peeling an onion. Anger is my top layer, but strip that back, and you'll uncover a lack of forgiveness and compassion driving that anger. What are your layers? Peel one away, and there's another

deeper, more hidden layer to deal with that maybe you never realized was there.

Some of you might say, “If the battle against sin is never done, then why even try? Why not just give up and indulge myself in whatever I desire? Why subject myself to the disciplines of counseling, reading, praying, self-constraint, repentance, and forgiveness when ultimate joy and wholeness are unattainable?”

In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Christian philosopher Dallas Willard addressed the challenge of living the Christian life. He said the word *disciple* appears 269 times in the New Testament but the word *Christian* appears only three times.² Why make that distinction? A disciple upholds disciplines. While others may see their regimen as burdensome or boring, these people faithfully maintain their disciplines out of dedication to Jesus. And as Christ taught, these disciplines provide the pathway to personal and relational wholeness.

Professional athletes know this well. They adhere to demanding disciplines and a boring regimen of drills, and they repeat them over and over again. Why? So they can defeat their opponents and experience the personal and professional fulfillment that comes with winning. If they neglect their daily disciplines, the result will be the exact opposite—personal, financial, and professional loss. It’s no different with the Christian life. Willard wrote, “There is almost universal belief in the immense difficulty of being a *real* Christian. The vast, grim ‘cost of discipleship’ is something we hear constantly emphasized.... But it must not be left to stand as the whole truth. We would do far better to lay a clear, constant emphasis upon the cost of *non-discipleship* as well.”³

DONE WITH THAT

The battle to overcome my sinful patterns isn't easy, and I'm profoundly disappointed when the things I've worked so hard to overcome resurface in the form of sharp words, flashes of anger, self-centeredness, or a lack of compassion. But although the battle is relentless, I'm gaining ground.

I'm not *as* angry, *as* self-centered, or *as* hard on others as I used to be. Before, I couldn't get through a single day without some kind of relational angst or flare-up, but now I enjoy longer stretches of relational peace. I'm more confident in my strengths and more accepting of my deficits. I feel genuinely content with my life and with those who are in my life. And in recent years, my relationship with God has changed from being rather distant and forced to being that of a son who enjoys walking through every day with his kind, benevolent, and proud Father.

The cost of discipleship is real, but the price of non-discipleship is a life that never improves and stays stuck in relational breakdown and personal strife. I thought I was done with that, but you're never really done with that.

THERE ARE STAGES OF GROWTH

I had no idea that the deeper layers of the onion, the issues that are harder to detect, actually fueled the more obvious ones. My lack of forgiveness and compassion was causing some of my anger and harsh words.

When you can't forgive yourself for making a mistake, you're hard on yourself. When you're hard on yourself, you're hard on others. When you're hard on others, you lack compassion for them.

I thought that if I managed my anger and my mouth, I would nail it. I thought those were my signature sins and, if I could control

those, then I was pretty close to being perfect. Our church's success over the previous ten years fooled me into thinking I had spiritually arrived.

However, when the cracks reappeared and Fred reentered the picture, I received another 125 pages of "fun" feedback.

That's the nature of spiritual growth. It comes in stages and waves. Overcome one thing, and there's another. Get a handle on one problem, and there's sure to be something else hiding beneath, deeper still.

Yet even here God is gracious and patient. Not only does He understand what we're made of, but He also knows growth takes time. Babies don't walk right away; they roll around, crawl, then walk and run. Adults also experience growth in stages, and it's tough to progress to the next milestone until you've gained some awareness and control in the previous stage.

The other day Fred met with our team for one last go-around, and he kicked off the meeting by having everyone comment on the growth we've seen in one another. The conversation moved around the room until the spotlight landed on me. As I wrote down each of the comments, one of them really stuck out. A colleague looked at me from across the table and said, "Ten years ago you made some great changes in your behavior, and you began treating people much better. But now you actually really care about people, and it's genuine. I can feel it in your spirit, and others can too."

You'll never know how grateful I was to hear that. And it's true. I'm actually starting to like people! God wants our love to be sincere. Sadly, mine once wasn't.

For years I taught that love is primarily a behavior, not a feeling. And to some degree, that is true. Like when I choose to forgive

someone, that's a loving action—not a feeling. When I'm patient with people or tell the truth about their sin, that's an act of love—once again, not feeling. Love is an action, whether I like the person or not. So for years I excused myself from trying to *like* people. I thought as long as I behaved lovingly toward them by being patient or telling them the truth, then I was good with God.

But then I read Romans 12:10: “Love each other with genuine affection” (NLT). In other words, don't just act in loving ways toward people—make an effort to like them too. I had no idea how to do that (and I still struggle with it). For me it goes back to learning how to forgive myself. To give grace when I fail and tone it down when I'm tempted to beat myself up. Because if I can't bury the hatchet with myself, how can I forgive or show compassion to others?

I'm slowly learning that when I extend forgiveness—to myself and others—my compassion grows. And as my compassion grows, I start to feel genuine affection for others too. I'm beginning to like people, and miracle of miracles, they're starting to like me back. And that feels so good.

It doesn't matter where you are or how far you've come; we're never done growing. What matters is that we're willing to keep getting better—because the cost of discipleship is real but the cost of non-discipleship is greater.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you handle feedback? Receiving it can make us better, so how can you actively seek it out and listen more effectively when it is given?

2. What little annoyances do you need to let go of for the sake of your relationships?
3. When have you felt as if you experienced victory, won the battle, and were done with something—only later to have it resurface? Explain what contributed to this happening. How could you have prevented that issue's return?

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