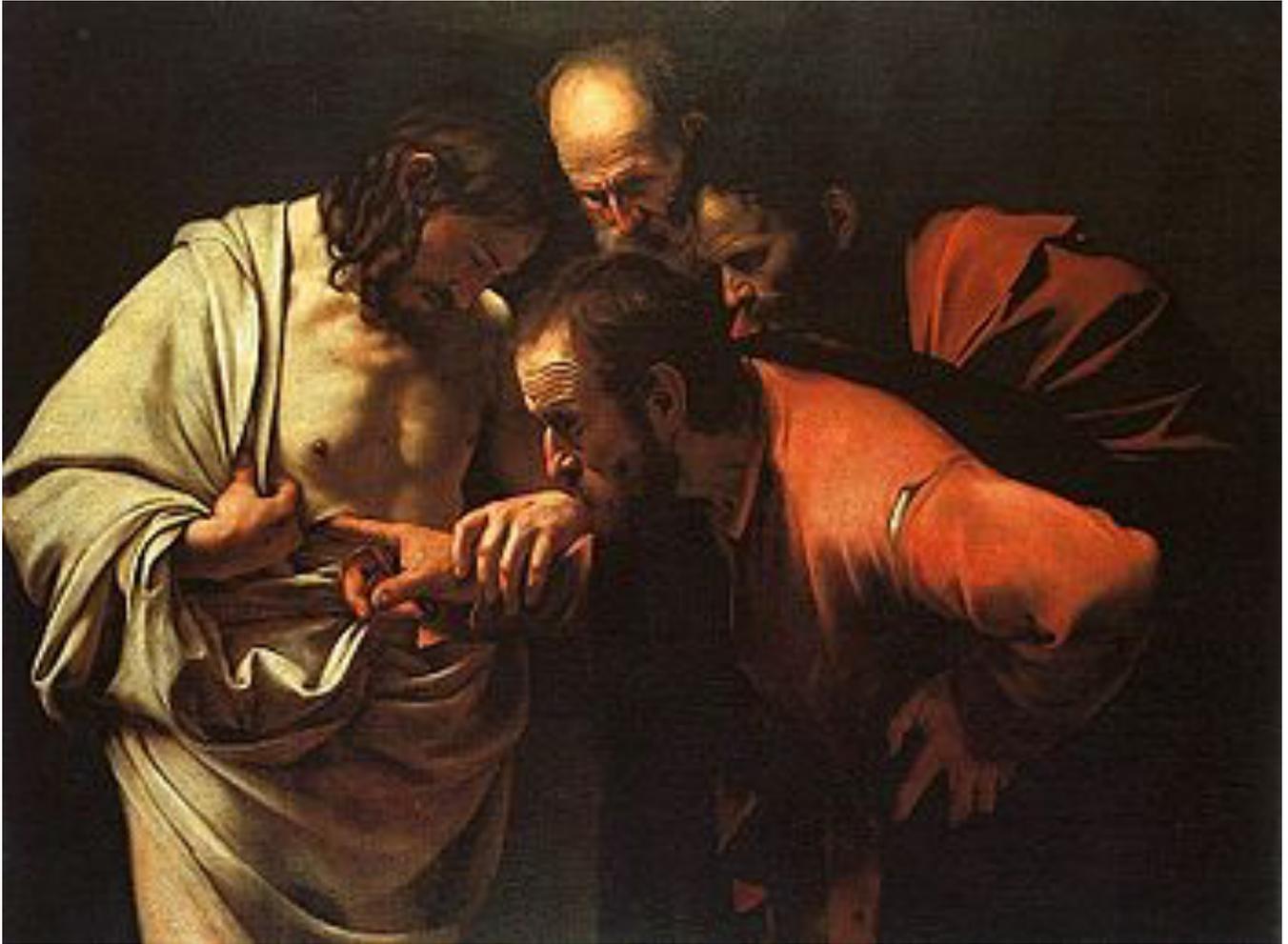


Tensions



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas by Caravaggio

So he put aside his prison clothes
and for the rest of his life ate regularly at the king's table.

Jeremiah 52:33

August Tensions

The redeeming power of doubt;
grace and truth; handling tensions within our faith

Scripture-based exploration

- ☀ *Blue Book* chapters: Faith, Questions, Between, the Heart
- ☀ The story of Peter's faith and growth throughout the gospels. Stop and ponder Matthew 14:22-33 together.
- ☀ What doubts and tensions do you find in these Biblical characters: Peter; John the Baptist; King David; Solomon; Rehoboam; Abraham; Hagar; Esther; Jonah? Have some fun with this. Add in your own doubts and tensions to finish.

Non-Scripture readings

Ponder this quote from our friend Judy Huckaby's CaringBridge. She was diagnosed with melanoma ... had multiple small tumors ... many treatments ... and has this to say. Identify her tensions and her choices. What does her life speak into yours?

Woohoo remission! Celebrating with gratitude the gift of health and life!

But maybe what is more amazing than the gift of health is that I have been reflecting on these seven years and they have overall been more filled with contentment, fulfillment, and gratitude than any others in my life. Now I say "overall" because there have also been some significantly low and hard times intermingled in - particularly on the front end when living with an incurable life-threatening disease seemed overwhelming. However those very trials drove me to "come" and trust God in deeper ways and to change my perspective on living life. Each day now is a new gift, so living it well, enjoying it, and making it count in some meaningful way (usually ordinary ways) calls me to the present and contentment, fulfillment and gratitude have been the overflow. Often I am moved to reach my arms to the heavens and say, "I am so happy and grateful, Abba Father." He will be just as loving and good when the gift of life on this earth concludes, but for now I celebrate life.

Online

Go to I Am Second's website and click the Films tab. You can listen to testimonies by clicking on the picture of the person; you will see athletes, unknown people, superstars, entertainers, adults, teens ... See how God uses tension in the lives of His children. I (Suzanne) recommend Brian Welch if you've never heard his story. What are the tensions regarding faith and challenge in the lives of the people you watch? How do they encourage you?

Artwork for the creatives

Choose a few tension pairs and illustrate them. For example, judgment-mercy; grace-truth; good-bad; life-death; worry-freedom; perfectionism-grace.

Write a song about the tensions and doubts you feel as a child of God. Be honest. Be vulnerable. Then send it to us! (Suzanne would love to sing harmony.)

Movies

Schindler's List, the classic. The moral tension in this movie is palpable. What tensions does Liam Neeson's character feel throughout the movie, and particularly at the end? What doubts does he experience?

Les Miserables: What tensions do the main characters feel? What moral decisions do they confront? Who is the best living example of grace and truth? What characters tend toward grace, and who tends toward truth?

Questions to ponder

Throughout this lesson there are many questions. Highlight them ... and go there!

When do your doubts arise? Is there a pattern?

What doubts and tensions do you find in these Biblical characters: Peter; John the Baptist; King David; Solomon; Rehoboam; Abraham; Hagar; Esther; Jonah? Have some fun with this. Add in your own doubts and tensions to finish.

Who in the Bible, besides Jesus, is a strong picture of grace and truth?

In your experience, how has God made Himself real to you in being *full of grace and truth*? Go around and answer this question in your group.

Week One: Doubt (Rebekah)

Doubt ... my goodness, when I think about doubt, I begin to see how much doubt I live with ... all the time. I doubt. I question. I struggle.

I live with murky vision; everything is not crystal clear, and that uncertainty can lead to doubt. For me, it comes out in wondering not so much if God can do something, but more will He do it for me. God loves me, but does He really like me? I mean, there are many days that I'm not too fond of myself, so why would the God of the universe, who knows me more fully than I can ever know myself, like me?

The incomprehensibility of God, His greatness and majesty bring about awe and worship. But they can also cause us (me) to wonder, question, doubt how this same God can want to be acquainted with me. Why would He want me to be part of His Kingdom? Why/How is it possible that I am His beloved daughter? My feeble, created, finite mind cannot comprehend (fully) the infinite Creator and His ways.

And so I question ... I doubt. Do you?

What do your doubts look/sound like?

Is there a pattern to your doubts?

I think often when we think about doubt the first person who comes to mind is Thomas. I mean, he even has been given the nickname "Doubting Thomas". Read through John 20:24-28. I can understand Thomas' doubt about the risen Jesus. He had been with Jesus and the other disciples. Then I think when Jesus was crucified he may have felt like he had been duped. Everything he had hoped Jesus would be and do; peace, Jewish independence and rule, greatness in this world, etc., died on the cross with Jesus. He was disappointed and disillusioned. So when his friends, his fellow disciples, tell him they have seen the resurrected Jesus... "Yeah, right," he responds. "That's just wishful thinking. It was someone else. You must think I'm a complete idiot to believe you. I want to see Him myself before I'll believe. I want to see where the nails pierced Him. Actually I don't just want to see the scars, I want to touch them. Then maybe I'll believe."

I think Thomas was so disappointed and heartbroken about Jesus' death that even if he wanted to believe his friends' testimonies, he couldn't. He couldn't even hope anymore. Jesus' resurrection was/is so outside of what "normally occurs" that to hope for it to be true was too much for Thomas. Perhaps he thought, "I've already been made a fool of once, I'm not putting myself in that position again!" So he issues a challenge: "Yeah, you've seen Jesus, show Him to me. I want proof this time. No more blind faith ... I want physical, touchable proof, then I'll believe."

Have you been disappointed like Thomas? Thinking things would turn out one way and then going a different direction?

How do you deal with hope now? Are you "cautiously optimistic"?

Do you hope but hold back a bit so if you are wrong you won't be devastated, again?

How would you describe God's goodness?

Is His goodness for you? Or only for other people?

I love that Jesus goes to Thomas and gives/shows him the evidence he needs to fully believe. Jesus doesn't say, "You've known me for 3 years, we spoke together, traveled and healed together, and now your

friends tell you I have risen. If you don't believe that evidence, then we are done. I give up!" (THANK YOU JESUS YOU DON'T DO THAT!!!) No, Jesus understands that Thomas is uncertain, afraid to hope and needs to see, feel and touch the evidence of His resurrection. And He provides. I love this!!

Often my doubts can build and grow because those around me are not doubting and questioning like I am. What is wrong with me? Why can I not just trust and believe? For so many varying reasons ... but the Lord knows that. And He continues to pursue me. He keeps coming after me with more and more evidence of His love, His trustworthiness, His grace. He keeps chipping away (and at times blowing up) my doubts, until I believe Him.

In Matthew 28:16-20, we see the eleven disciples worshipping Jesus on the mountain. And there is this phrase in the midst of everything: "but some doubted." WHAT???? Jesus is there with you and some of you doubt? I can look at the disciples, sometimes, and wonder how they didn't "get it" when they were, literally, walking and talking with Jesus. But I forget that they are just like me, except they only had the Old Testament. Not the New Testament. Their lives were actually writing the New Testament. And they doubted. They wondered if what they heard was true. Were their eyes deceiving them? Or could they believe? What they had thought, and often what they had been taught, would happen when the Messiah came has been turned on its head.

But right after we are told they doubted, Matthew tells us that "Jesus came to them" and He spoke to them, and gave them what has become the "Great Commission". In the midst of their doubt, Jesus reassures them that His authority (not their own) is on them and they are to go to all nations and make disciples. Tell everyone what you have seen, heard, experienced, touched, believed. Notice that Jesus doesn't say, when you believe fully or when your questions and doubts have been answered, then go. No. It's right now, in the midst of those doubts, go. Spread the Good News. Is this encouraging to you? It is to me. It reminds me that even in the midst of my doubts and questions, I am called and empowered by Christ to go. I am not to stay in my safe places. I am to bring what I firmly know along with my questions and wonderings into the world. For me at least, these doubts can help to remind me that I do not know or understand everything about God, but He does reveal Himself to us. He does say, Come, see. "Put your finger here Do not disbelieve, but believe" (John 20:27).

Take some time and read about another friend of Jesus' (and mine), Peter. I love Peter. I think of Peter as always running. He's running ahead in his mind, his actions and his words. He stumbles and bumbles and believes and loves deeply. Let's look at one specific event in his life and then put ourselves into the story.

Matthew 14:22-33

What stands out to you? What do you notice?

What does Peter do?

What does Jesus do?

Getting out of the boat takes courage, faith, and trust. Where in your life is God calling you to step out of the boat?

Where is He calling you out onto the rough seas?

What doubts or questions are keeping you either holding onto the side of the boat or are causing you to begin to sink?

Confess your questions and doubts to the Lord. Ask Him to help you to continue walking.

Some quotes to ponder:

"The minute we begin to think we know all the answers, we forget the questions, and we become smug like the Pharisee who listed all his considerable virtues, and thanked God that he was not like other men Those who believe they believe in God, but without passion in the heart, without anguish of mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, and even at times without despair, believe only in the idea of God, and not in God himself." – Madeleine L'Engle

"When people wrestle with doubt, they may tell themselves that they will try harder to have more faith. But faith is not the sort of thing that can be acquired by trying harder Never try to have more faith - just get to know God better. And because God is faithful, the better you know Him, the more you will trust him. The way to get to know his trustworthiness is to risk obeying him....How much faith do I need? Not a feeling of certainty. Just enough faith to take a step." John Ortberg (If You Want to Walk on Water, You've Got to Get out of the Boat)

“Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.” – Frederick Buechner

“Walking on water is not about some great thing you will do. In fact, by yourself you can do nothing of lasting value. It is about what God longs to do with you by his power and grace. But first you have to get your feet wet.” John Ortberg (If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get out of the Boat)

“Belief in God does not exempt us from feelings of abandonment by God. Praising God does not inoculate us from doubts about God.” – Eugene Peterson

Week Two: Tensions (Suz)

A few years ago I heard Reggie Joiner’s Catalyst talk in Atlanta on tensions in the faith. It was excellent. He started me thinking ... and thinking ... and thinking. Reggie’s talk was based the first two columns in this chart; God has had me writing and living through the third and fourth columns since that evening in Atlanta.

The chart is set up to highlight two ends of the spectrum of how we Christians sometimes talk about faith. Often, a new believer is taught the first column without the second column, and ultimately leaves the faith in despair when she finds she cannot be satisfied with just the first column.

I believe that we, as Christians, need to be candid in acknowledging the truths in both columns. Otherwise, people will get discouraged as they go through their new life in faith. Let me give you an example.

A few rows down on your chart is “The Bible is all true.” Yes! Amen! Tell yourself and new believers that. Stake your life on it, as many have through the centuries.

But don’t forget the next column: “Everything true about life is not in the Bible.” Wait, is that blasphemy? No.

The Bible doesn’t tell you on which street you should live,
who you should marry (specifically),
where and if you should attend college,
how you should eat tonight,
what you should grow in your garden,
or how to pack for your trip.

It does contain principles and stories and accounts that touch on these things — marriage, knowledge, food, and travel — but it is not necessarily specific to you in this moment, in this situation.

The other part of this truth is that God’s word is living and active, so He can use every part of it to help answer your questions, give you guidance, and assure you about a decision you must make. Here’s another example.

An honorable man named Dwight asked me to marry him when I was in college. I didn’t know what to do or say. I respected him; saw his obvious love for God; enjoyed his affection for me; but needed more time to know his character, and fall in love if he was The Man. He told me that God assured him that I was The One. I told him I would fast and pray about it for three days.

The second evening I opened up my Bible and asked God what in the world I should do. Was this man my Intended? Was he The One? I prayed that God would guide me in the Scriptures to find my answer because I trusted the Bible far more than I trusted myself. I opened up my Bible and read a chapter in Isaiah, then came to Isaiah 54:5. It leapt off the page: “For your Maker is your husband—the Lord Almighty is his name—the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; He is called the God of all the earth.” I prayed and asked for confirmation, which God sent, and I told the man no. For the time being, I was to focus on God as my Husband. He knew I wasn’t ready and that the guy was not the right one for me. So YES, the Scripture is alive and will guide you; but study it wisely, and always get confirmation. Stay in the scope of the Scriptures to find the depth of God! Discuss, enjoy, see what you think!

New Christians are often taught this

But we also need this truth too

Here's a caution for all of us

And here's a question for all of us

You can know God	God is a mystery	Don't think you know it all.	Are you still discovering God?
You can become a Christian in a moment	It takes forever to find out what that means	Don't get discouraged — keep discovering.	Are you expanding in your understanding of being a Christian, of your faith?
The Bible is all true	Everything true about life is not in the Bible	Don't be too narrow as you apply Scripture to life.	Are you experiencing God in expansiveness and freedom?
When you trust God, it leads to stronger faith	Doubt can lead to stronger faith too	Don't be threatened by questions — keep asking and listening and wondering.	Are you willing to lean in to questions you cannot resolve? Can you stay in the tension?
You can enjoy church and experience the joy of God	You can enjoy living in the world (mountains, all that is good, movies, books, literature)	Don't limit God's gift of joy to a secular/sacred divide. Keep finding Him everywhere.	Are you enjoying God? Where? How?
Your beliefs matter; they drive your decisions	People matter	Don't be self-righteous as you communicate truth. Stay humble and kind.	Do your beliefs draw people into knowing God more fully? Can you discuss matters of faith without becoming contentious or defensive?
God has an ideal ; move toward that	God uses broken people to move His Kingdom	Don't be shallow in your understanding of people. We're all broken, AND we all bring His Kingdom.	How can you become more aware of your own brokenness? How can you take off your sin, put on Christ?
God is good ; His nature is fundamentally good	We will increasingly do good to reflect His character within us; the HS compels us; we have free will	Don't be arrogant as you see God working within you — keep giving Him credit for maturing you in His goodness.	Are you becoming increasingly like God, as His child? Is this increasing your faith, but not your pride?
Real satisfaction is in God	God does not promise happiness	Don't be fooled by a false, lesser happiness or satisfaction. Keep discovering contentment and satisfaction in God.	In what ways are you satisfied in God?
Community is essential	Solitude is essential	Don't over-isolate or over-congregate. Stay in fellowship with Christ and His people while simultaneously creating alone time.	Are you listening to the Holy Spirit tell you how to manage your energy, time, and soul?
God is merciful	God judges sin and sinners	Don't be naive. God's love compels both His love and His holy judgment.	How have you experienced the mercy of God? the judgment of God?
You are in a battle (flesh/self, world, Satan)	So are angels and demons	Don't be unarmed. Keep praying. Be aware; watch, but don't worry. He wins!	Do you know how to do battle for the Kingdom?
We affirm the truth	We wrestle with the truth	Don't be uninformed; Don't be afraid to wrestle! Keep wrestling until He blesses you!	What truth are you wrestling with right now?

Week Three: Grace and Truth (Summers)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory,
glory as of the only Son from the Father,
full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

We know that we are to follow Jesus, to become more like him. If we are to be like Jesus, then we, too, need to be full of grace and truth. It seems paradoxical when you really stop to think of it, as we tend to see these two as incompatible. Sometimes we see them put on different poles of a spectrum. Often our personalities determine which direction we will lean because we all tend to gravitate toward one or the other. However, we need to be grace people AND truth people. "Both-and," not "either-or."

Even still, we all know the grace people: "Grace people without truth are pleasant to be around, but we wonder if they really like us or if they are just trying to be liked. They are tolerant, but they often do not know the difference between right and wrong. Or they don't care to line up one way or the other. Grace people can be cowardly. They often refuse to make tough decisions in life. They demand nothing from others and get nothing in return. They accept us for who we are, but they never help us become who we should be" (Kevin DeYoung).

And we all know the truth people: "Truth people without grace are loyal to their cause, but we wonder if they are really loyal to us. They want to change us and make us better, but they don't allow for mistakes. They are quick to cast judgment on others. They make difficult decisions, but they also make life difficult for others and for themselves. They can be slow to forgive. They inspire us with their courage, but turn us off with their intimidation" (Kevin DeYoung).

Put simply, truth without grace leads to self-righteousness and legalism (yuck). And grace without truth breeds deception and moral wishy-washiness (yuck again).

So what does it look like to be full of grace AND love? Well, it looks a lot like Jesus. Jesus was all grace: He welcomed and ate with sinners and tax collectors and prostitutes. He had compassion on the crowds when they were hungry and restless. He welcomed the little children to come and sit on his lap. He healed the lepers, the lame, and the blind. He saved the criminal on the cross. And Jesus was all truth: He condemned the religious leaders for being hypocrites. He talked a lot more about hell than he talked about heaven. He called his disciples to take up their cross daily and follow him. He obeyed the law, set standards, and demanded everything from his followers, even their very lives.

Jesus came from the Father, who is full of grace AND truth. Therefore, Jesus was ALL grace, ALL truth, ALL of the time. We know from Scripture that Jesus said hard and challenging things. He was full of passion for the truth. Even still, people seemed to really like him because he exuded grace. "In a world of rules and demands, Jesus introduced grace -- and a revolutionary way of life" (Chuck Swindoll).

Grace AND truth are the core of the Gospel. When these two are combined, it is truly Good News: "Truth is the standard that guides grace, and grace gives us the power to live according to truth" (Mike Friesen).

Grace flows from our awareness of how much God has done for us and how little we deserve it. We all desperately need grace. Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). We need to see that we don't have to clean ourselves up before approaching the throne, that God accepts us just as we are.

Truth acts upon us and helps us see reality from God's perfect and holy perspective. Jesus tells us in John 8:32 that "the truth shall set you free." We need to know that we are not okay, that we are born into sin and are in desperate need of a Savior. God doesn't want to leave us as we are, but desires to regenerate us into the likeness of Christ.

Author Rob Renfro (*The Trouble with the Truth: Balancing Truth and Grace*) gives a great illustration of this “both-and” concept of truth and grace. Jesus tells his disciples (and us) to be salt and light in this decaying and dark world. If you go back to high school chemistry class with me for a minute, you’ll remember that table salt is made up of Sodium and Chloride. Sodium is never found alone in nature, as it’s always paired with another element. It is actually willing to accept and receive just about any other element out there. Grace is a lot like Sodium. It’s nature is to reach out and receive and embrace all others indiscriminately. Chloride, on the other hand, is the gas that gives bleach its strong smell. It acts as a powerful disinfectant, but we have to be careful with it. If it’s misused, it can be poisonous (and give us a big ol’ headache!) and even destructive. Truth is a lot like Chloride. It’s nature is to be cleansing, but it can be offensive and difficult to be around, even destructive if mishandled.

If we are to be salt, if we are to take seriously Jesus’ command to follow him, then we must be “both-and” when it comes to truth and grace. Both are essential in representing the Father’s heart. What direction do you tend to lean? How might you grow in your compassion for people (grace)? How might you develop more of a passion for truth?

Short Form: What if my group can’t do all this stuff?

Week One:

Do the Blue Book chapter on **Faith** together. Go through all of the daily Scriptures and discuss the ones that leap off the page at you. Look through the Readings for Reflection and choose a few to discuss.

Week Two: From Rebekah on Doubt

Read through John 20:24-28, focusing on Thomas (nicknamed “Doubting Thomas”). Rebekah writes, [I love that Jesus goes to Thomas and gives/shows him the evidence he needs to fully believe. Jesus doesn’t say, “You’ve known me for 3 years, we spoke together, traveled and healed together, and now your friends tell you have risen. If you don’t believe that evidence, then we are done. I give up!” \(THANK YOU JESUS YOU DON’T DO THAT!!!\) No, Jesus understands that Thomas is uncertain, afraid to hope and needs to see, feel and touch the evidence of His resurrection. And He provides. I love this!](#)

Discuss this in your group.

What do you do with your doubts? How do you think God sees you in the midst of your doubts?

Week Three: From Suz on Tensions

Explore Suzanne’s chart. What tensions from the first two columns do you especially relate to? What questions are significant to you (final column)? Discuss a few of them.

Week Four: From Summers on Grace and Truth:

Review part of the tension between grace and truth with Summers. Do you lean more toward being a **grace** person or a **truth** person? How can you become more like Jesus with yourself and others, *full of grace and truth*?

Even still, we all know the grace people: “Grace people without truth are pleasant to be around, but we wonder if they really like us or if they are just trying to be liked. They are tolerant, but they often do not know the difference between right and wrong. Or they don’t care to line up one way or the other. Grace people can be cowardly. They often refuse to make tough decisions in life. They demand nothing from others and get nothing in return. They accept us for who we are, but they never help us become who we should be” (Kevin DeYoung).

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The Word

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