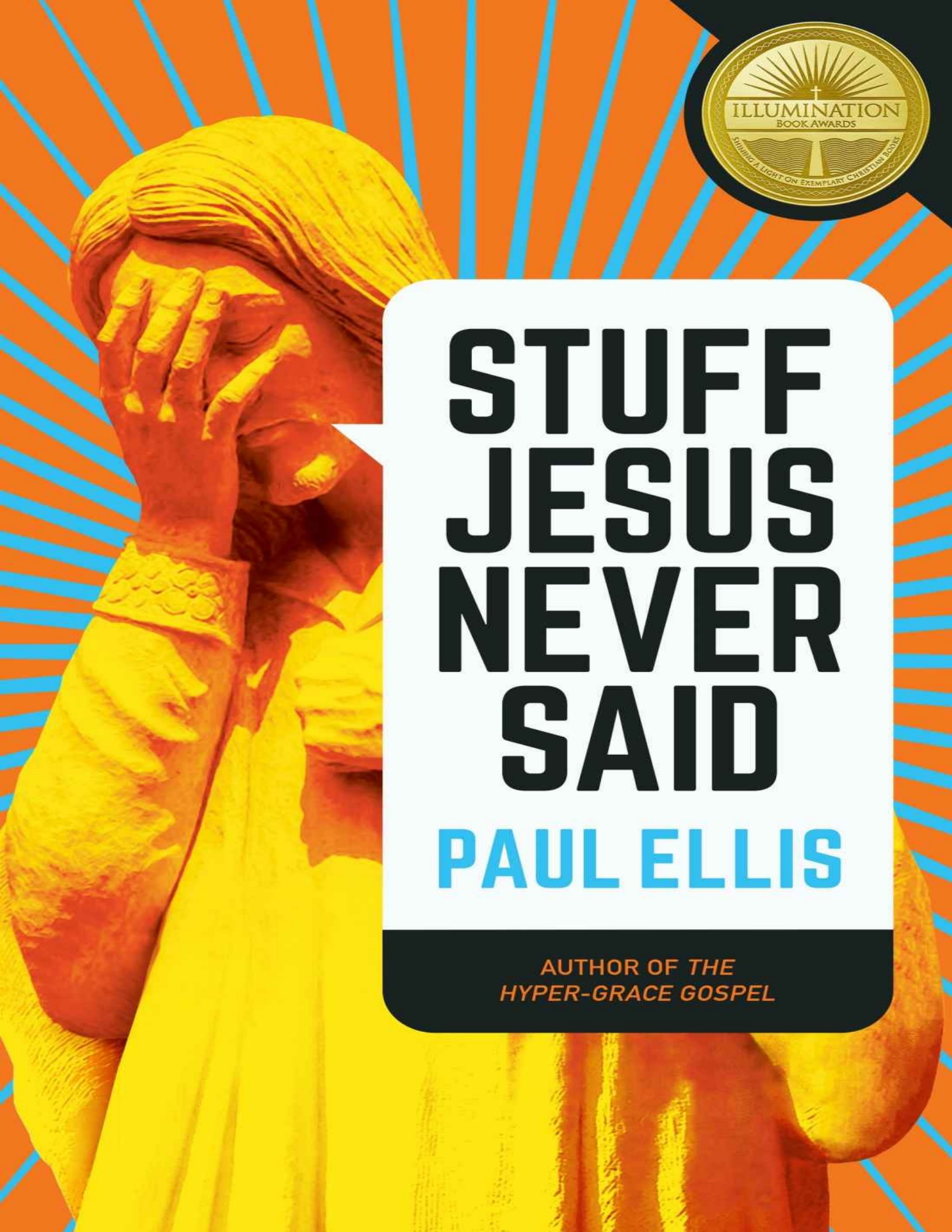

ILLUMINATION
BOOK AWARDS
SHINING A LIGHT ON EXEMPLARY CHRISTIAN BOOKS
STUFF JESUS NEVER SAID
PAUL ELLIS
AUTHOR OF THE HYPER-GRACE GOSPEL

Stuff Jesus Never Said

ISBN: 978-1-927230-37-4
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Published by KingsPress, Birkenhead, New Zealand. This title is also available in hardcover. Visit www.KingsPress.org for information.

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Cover layout and design by Brad Wallace of bradwallaceimaging.com.

Version: 1.1 (February 2017)

Dedication: This is for Camilla, who laughed when she saw the first meme.

Table of Contents

Prologue

God loves you but he’s also mad at you

God helps those who help themselves

Depression? Pull yourself together man!

You owe me

When you sin God gets angry

God is recording all your sins on videotape

Grace is free but you have to prove you were worth it

I can’t heal you—there’s too much sin in your life

God gives and takes away

He loves you, he loves you not

Divorced? You’re definitely a sinner

You disappoint me

Give and God will erase your credit card debt

You’re a mistake

Going to the doctor is a sign of unbelief

O happy day, when I washed some of your sins away

When you do communion remember your sins

God forgives in installments

They said, “Let’s call down fire from heaven,” and I said, “Sounds like a plan!”

My law will teach you all things

Faith is a work

You miscarried? God needed another angel in heaven

If you’re not enthusiastic I’ll spew you out

Go and sin no more—or else!

Don’t bother God with the small stuff

God loves you more if you obey him

Sinner? God can’t hear you

Your illness is from God

Why are you sick? Because I’m mysterious

Don’t ask questions

My law will help you overcome sin
You're not trying hard enough
Receive some guilt
If you don't tithe God will take it off you in doctor's bills
Your sickness is a blessing in disguise
Grace is a license to sin
Your son committed suicide? He's in hell
You're not good enough
Nothing can separate you from the love of God—except sin, and skipping church
Get busy—God's keeping score
If you don't tithe you're a thief and a robber
This city's so full of sin I gotta send an earthquake
I have come that you might have religion
If you're not careful I'll blot out your name
Preaching grace without law is unbalanced
Let's see who's paid their tithes this month
God took your job because you were enjoying it too much
God forgives but never forgets
Communion is for the worthy
Have some sickness, it'll teach you character
God wants you poor so you can learn humility
When you do wrong I can't be in fellowship with you
You need waaaaay more faith
I can't heal you—you haven't fasted
Leave your current husband and reconcile with your first
Leave the church and we'll shun you
I can't forgive you—you haven't confessed
I gave it all, what are you giving?
Sorry, your prayer wasn't long enough
You're on your own
Acknowledgments
Sources and credits
Back-ads

FAIR WARNING

“You have the words of real life,” said the disciples to Jesus. The words Christ spoke healed the sick, raised the dead, and stilled storms. His words revealed a God radically different to the one portrayed by religion. In fact, Christ’s words were so shocking, so scandalous, that religious people tried to kill him.

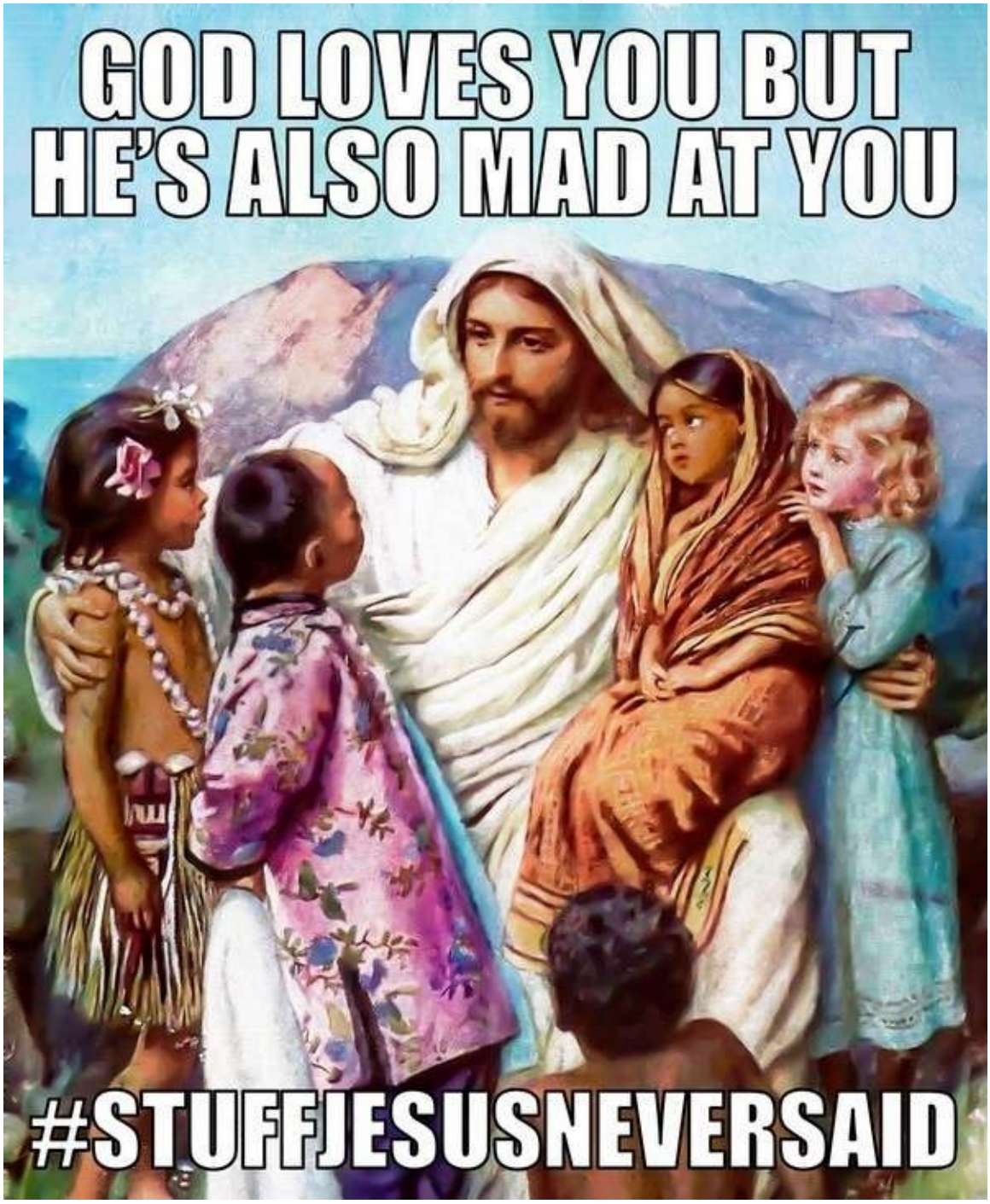
Jesus’ words—the disciples had never heard anything like them. Maybe you haven’t either, hence this book. If the stuff Jesus never said is the stuff you thought he said, then the stuff he did say may surprise you.

Jesus spoke about the stuff of life. In this book we will see what Jesus had to say on subjects ranging from divorce and guilt to depression and giving. We will draw a line between what we’ve heard and what Jesus actually said. This line is the difference between good news and bad news. It’s the difference between truth and tradition, sweet and sour, life and death.

There is nothing original in this book. All the stuff Jesus said comes from the Bible, and all the stuff we think he said comes from manmade religion. For helping me to understand the benefits of the former and the harms of the latter, I am grateful to the many people who have contributed to the “Stuff Jesus Never Said” Facebook page.

Fair warning: Some of the images in this book will make you laugh, but some will make you mad. You’ll laugh because religion can be ridiculous, and you’ll get mad because religion can be cruel. In the name of God, we have been told some horrible things. But strip away the mumbo jumbo—all the stuff Jesus never said—and what remains is pure gold.

Jesus still speaks the words of real life.



HE'S MAD ABOUT YOU, NOT MAD AT YOU

Jesus revealed the love of God to all kinds of people, good and bad, and not once did he smite anyone with judgment. He never made a fist, called down fire from

heaven, or summoned locust plagues.

So from whence comes this idea that God is angry with us? It comes from fiery men like John the Baptist and the Prophet Elijah, men who understood that a holy God cannot tolerate sin. Their message was, “If you sin, you’re in trouble.”

That’s not a bad message, it’s just incomplete. It’s not the whole story. The problem is we all sin and fall short of God’s lofty standard. You can repent and promise to do better next time, but you won’t. The incontrovertible lesson of history is that we humans screw up again and again.

But the good news is that God loves us anyway, and he doesn’t leave us to our own devices. He intervenes. He steps into human history to bust us out of the prison of sin and pave the way for us to come home.

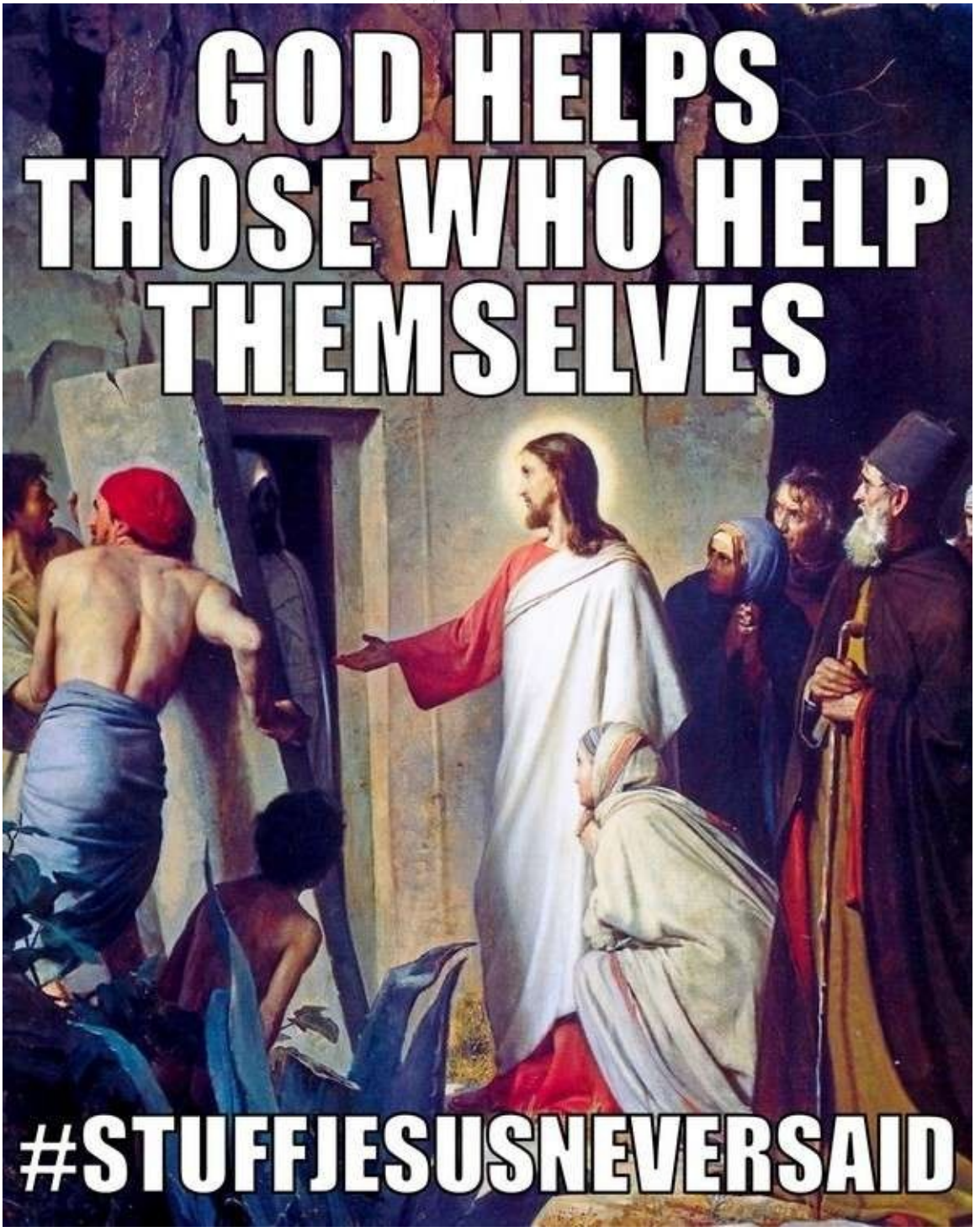
How did he do it? On the cross God dropped an atom bomb of wrath on our sin. The sin that condemned us, he condemned, and now there is nothing left to condemn.

Why does God love us so? Because he’s our Father. This is what Jesus came to tell us. This is the name of God that he gave. The Almighty Maker of heaven and earth is your heavenly Father who loves you more than you know.

God is not mad at you, he’s mad about you.

“I’ve never quit loving you and never will. Expect love, love, and more love!”
Jeremiah 31:3 (MSG)

God helps those who help themselves



GOD HELPS THE HELPLESS

Self-help religion says, “If you want God’s help, you have to work for it. You

have to pull up your socks to impress the Lord." But look at the people Jesus helped and you will see that God is not like this.

Jesus helped handicapped people, powerless widows, sick children, and paralyzed servants. Jesus helped dead people.

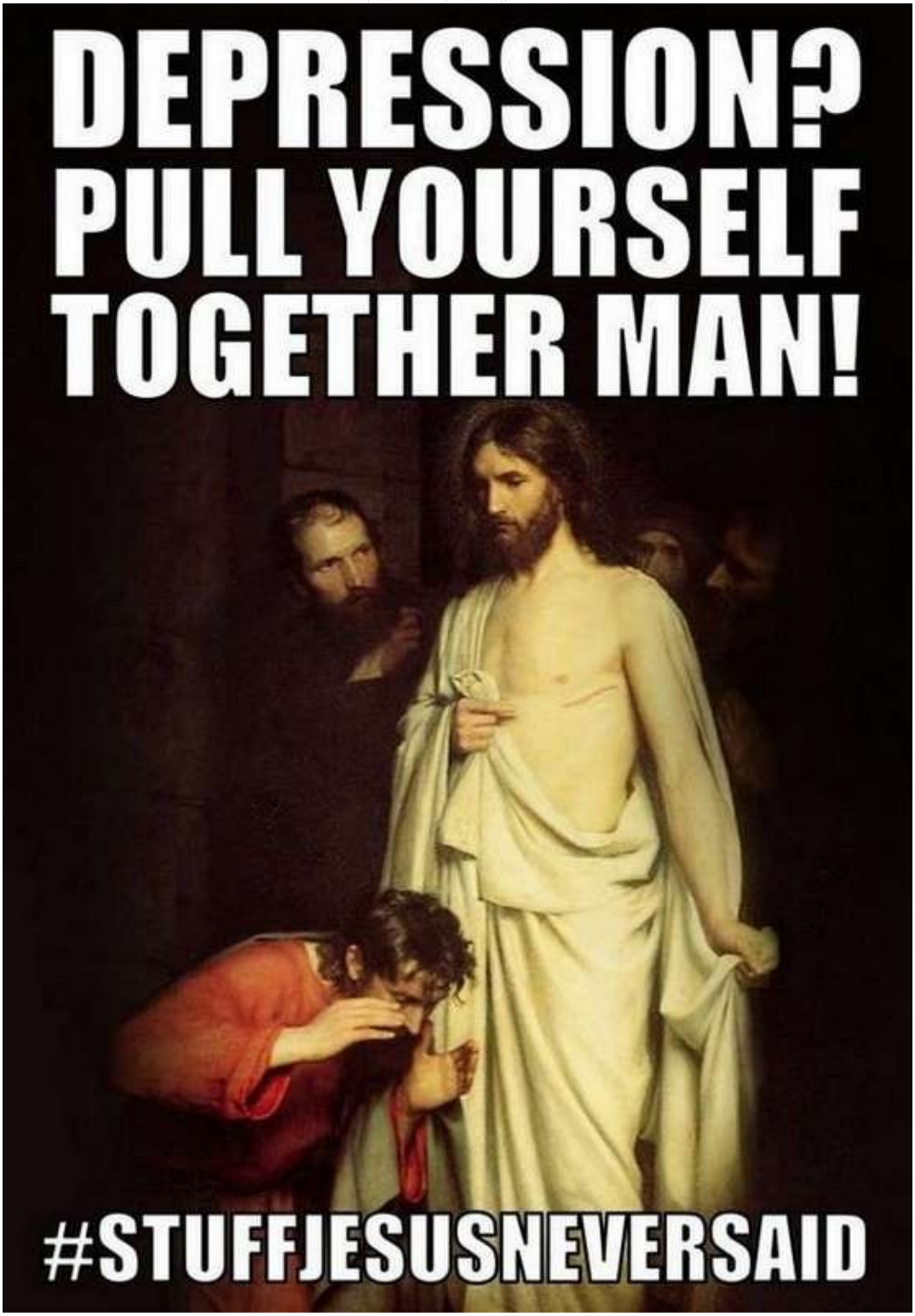
God doesn't help those who have their acts together. He helps the helpless. He helps those whose lives are a mess. Their car won't start, their kids are sick, and they haven't brushed their hair in a week. He helps those who ask for help.

God surely wants to help everyone, but only the helpless receive his help.

On one occasion people were bringing their babies to Jesus for him to bless them. Jesus said, "Unless you change and become helpless as a babe, you'll never enter the kingdom." Another time he said, "Whoever humbles himself like a little child will make a big splash in the kingdom."

In this world success is sold as the product of hard work and perseverance. Success is for the self-made man. But in God's kingdom the path to greatness is the one taken by the weak and the meek. It's for those who are too broken to pretend, and too tired to strive. Real success, the kind that lasts and brings no sorrow, is for those who cry, "God, help!"

"My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." **Psalm 121:2**



THE LIFTER OF YOUR HEAD

In Jesus' day, only certain people were allowed to participate in temple life. Those with diseases such as leprosy had to stay away. They weren't welcome. They were considered infectious and untouchable.

But Jesus was not afraid to touch the untouchables. He went to where they were and "infected" them with his love and healing power.

When we cultivate the attitude that church is a place for perfect people with perfect hair and perfect smiles, we inevitably marginalize those who are going through hard times. "You've got to be walking in victory every day." But what if you're not? What if you can't get out of bed because you're bound with anxiety and fear? What then?

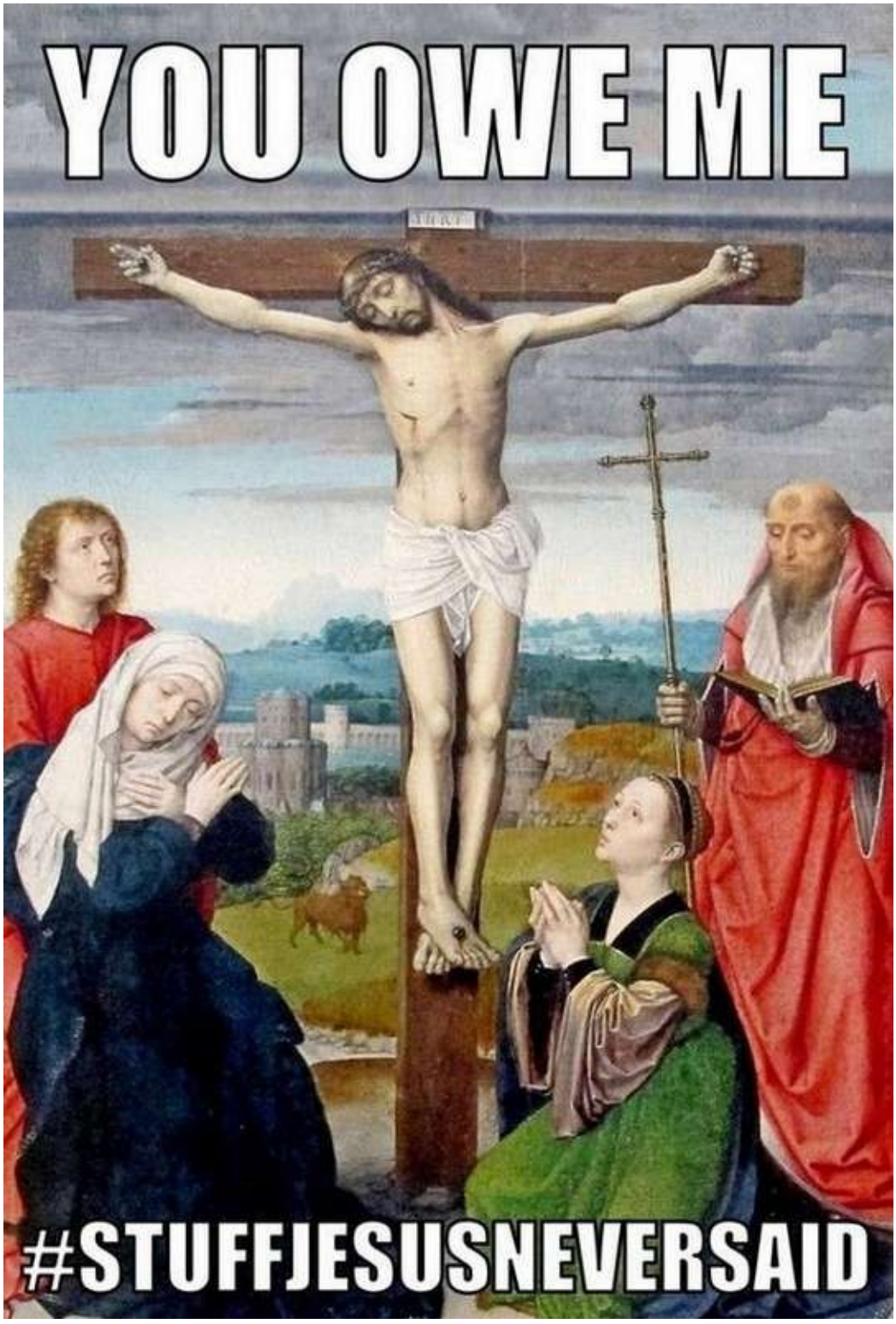
People suffering with mental illness and emotional instability can be made to feel like the lepers of old. This happens when they hear things like, "Depression is a sin," and, "If you read your Bible every day, you will never get depressed."

This is poisonous logic. It suggests the mentally unwell are sinners. They are the unclean who don't belong in our meetings. They can come as long as they wear a plastic smile and leave their problems at home.

Jesus would disagree.

Jesus had a thing for lepers. He healed so many! He did this to show us that his heart is always for the broken and hurting and those outside the camp. His heart is for those who can't get out of bed and whose medicine cabinets are full of Zoloft and Prozac.

"But you, O Lord, are a shield for me, my glory, and the lifter of my head."
Psalm 3:3 (AMP)



ALL IS A GIFT

In this life we have many debts. We owe taxes, school fees, student loans, car payments, mortgage bills, credit cards, utilities, and more. Being in debt can put stress on your health and marriage. A heavy debt can make you sick. An unsettled debt can sink a friendship.

So how is it good news to hear Jesus say, “You owe me everything”?

This is not good news, yet it is the message many hear. “Jesus died for you, what will you do for him?”

The message of *quid pro quo* will make you conscious of your debt to Christ, but the good news of grace declares, “All is a gift.” There is no debt. God holds nothing against you.

Under the old laws of Israel, the Jews were supposed to celebrate the Year of Jubilee. Every fifty years they were to free slaves, cancel debts, and proclaim liberty throughout the land. Yet they never did it.

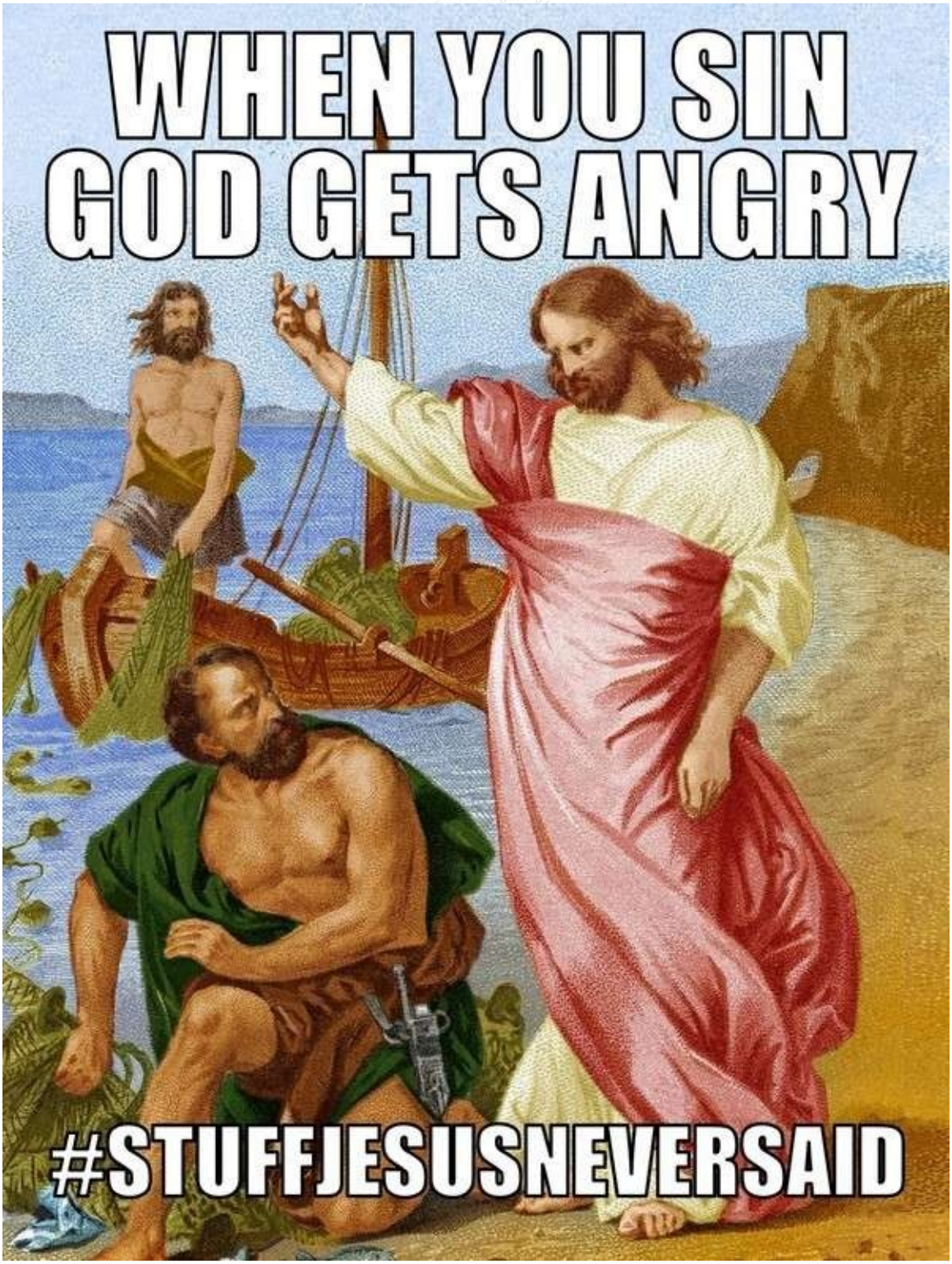
Then Jesus showed up and said, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” In other words, “This is the year of Jubilee. All debts against God are forgiven. The slaves of sin are free.”

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven was like a forgiving king who canceled his servants’ debts. The question is not, “Will God forgive you,” but, “Will you receive the forgiveness he has already provided in Christ.”

Jesus is our Jubilee.

“Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean.” **Colossians 2:13–14 (MSG)**

When you sin God gets angry



LOVED THROUGH THICK AND THIN

The God that Jesus revealed is a good Father who responds to his kids' mistakes with love and grace. When you sin, God doesn't ball up his fists. Hot steam doesn't come out of his ears. He doesn't remove his belt and give you a good thrashing. Here are some other things God will never do when you sin:

- He won't condemn you or hold your sin against you
- He won't send you on a guilt trip
- He won't withdraw from you until you get your act together
- He won't kick you out of his family

But will he get angry? It's not possible. God poured out all his wrath on sin at the cross. No anger remains. For him to be angry with your sin would be like saying Jesus didn't do a good job, or that he needs to come and die again.

Does God care when we sin? Very much. Our sins make him sad because they hurt us. Sin damages people, fractures friendships, and destroys families.

Your behavior matters to God because *you* matter to God.

Like a good father, he wants you to prosper in life. He doesn't want you opening the door to trouble. But even if you do, he remains your Father, and you are still his dearly loved child.

"I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again." **Isaiah 54:9**

God is recording all your sins on videotape



LOVE KEEPS NO RECORD OF WRONGS

Have you heard the one about how God is recording everything you say and do, and on Judgment Day he'll show all your dark, dirty secrets on a big TV screen? It's a frightening thought—but it's a fiction.

God is not like that. God is love, and love keeps no record of wrongs. Not a diary, not a videotape, nothing. If he's making a movie of your life, it's a highlight reel, not a horror flick.

God keeps no videotapes, but we may have quite the collection. They play in the dark cinema of our minds rehashing our regrets, broadcasting our bitter

memories, and showing our secret shame.

The dirty tapes of our lives cripple us. They suck the color out of our days and the sleep out of our nights. They keep us from entering the house of grace and enjoying the banquet of God's favor.

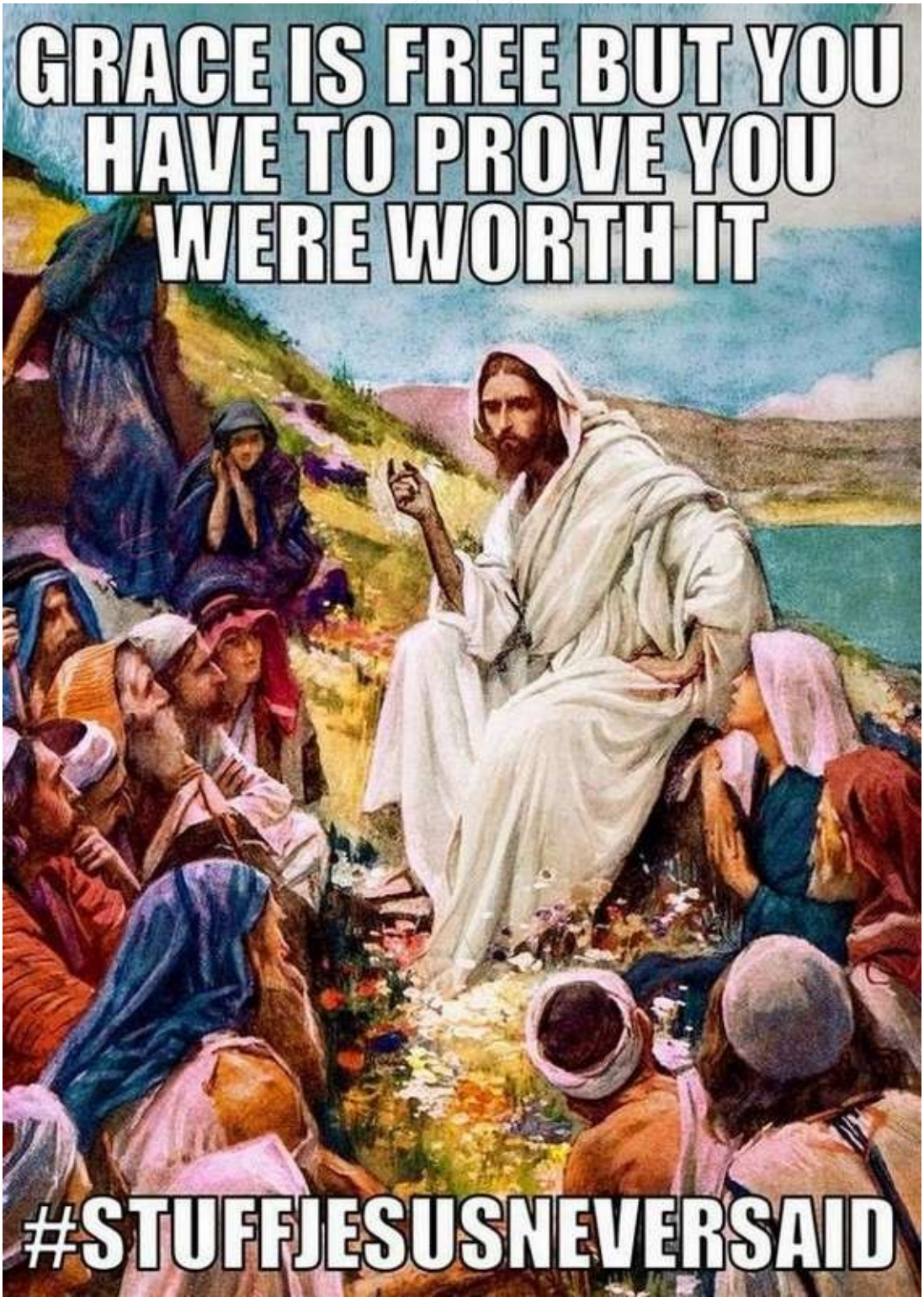
"I cannot come in," we say. "I've done some bad stuff." And God replies, "I hold nothing against you."

"But haven't you seen what I did?" And God replies, "Haven't you seen what *Jesus* did?"

Your videotapes don't belong to you. Jesus purchased them with his blood. If they start playing in your head, change the channel. Look to Christ who is the star of a better movie.

"Happy are those whose wrongs are forgiven, whose sins are pardoned! Happy is the person whose sins the Lord will not keep account of!" **Romans 4:7–8 (GNB)**

Grace is free but you have to prove you were worth it



YOU ARE THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

It was Christmas morning and in the orphanage the children woke with great excitement. Father Christmas was here! From his sack he handed out wondrous gifts, leaving the children speechless with delight. Then he invited them to a table laden with a feast such as they never imagined. The children ate and shouted and played and danced and had the time of their lives.

When the table was empty and the plates had been cleared away, Father Christmas addressed them in a serious tone. “Children, we’ve had fun but nothing in life is free. I expect you to repay me for the food and gifts. Here’s the bill.” The children were sad because they were poor and had nothing to give. But with honest hearts they promised to work hard for as long as it took to settle the account.

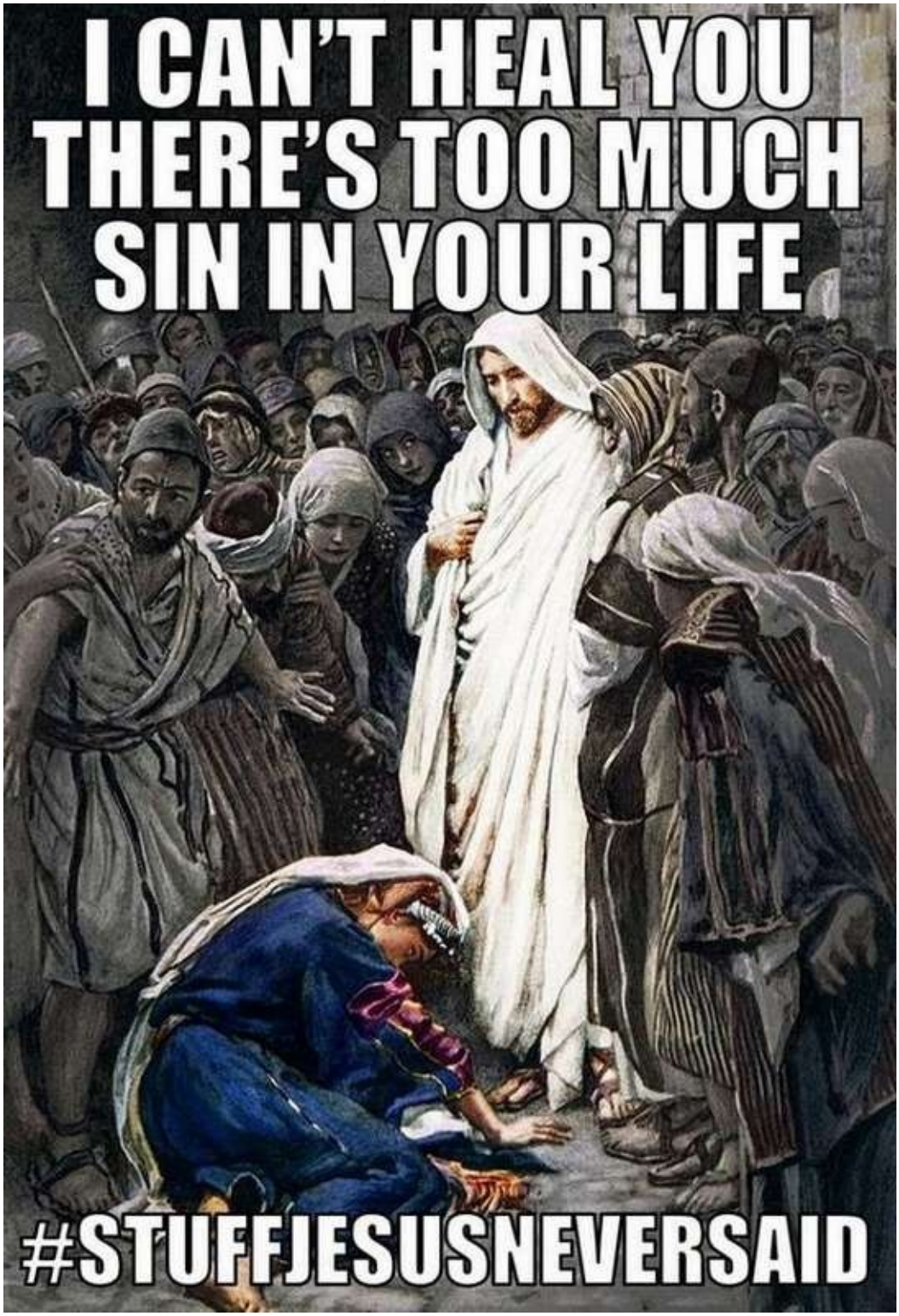
This grotesque picture of twisted generosity does not describe what Jesus did for you. Jesus did not suffer and die in the hope that you might prove yourself worthy. It’s the other way around. Because you were worth it, he died for you.

Jesus said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant hunting for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he sold all he had and bought it.”

Who is the pearl of great price? You are, and Jesus is the one who sold all he had to redeem you.

You are worth more than you know. This is the true message of the cross. You are so precious to Christ that he would rather die than live without you.

“You are precious and honored in my sight.” **Isaiah 43:4**



GOD'S GRACE IS GREATER THAN YOUR SIN

A woman with a hemorrhage touched the hem of Jesus' garment and was healed. By the standards of the day, this woman was a law-breaking sinner. Being ceremonially unclean she wasn't supposed to be out in public. Anything she touched became unclean or defiled, but she touched Jesus and was healed from a long-term infirmity.

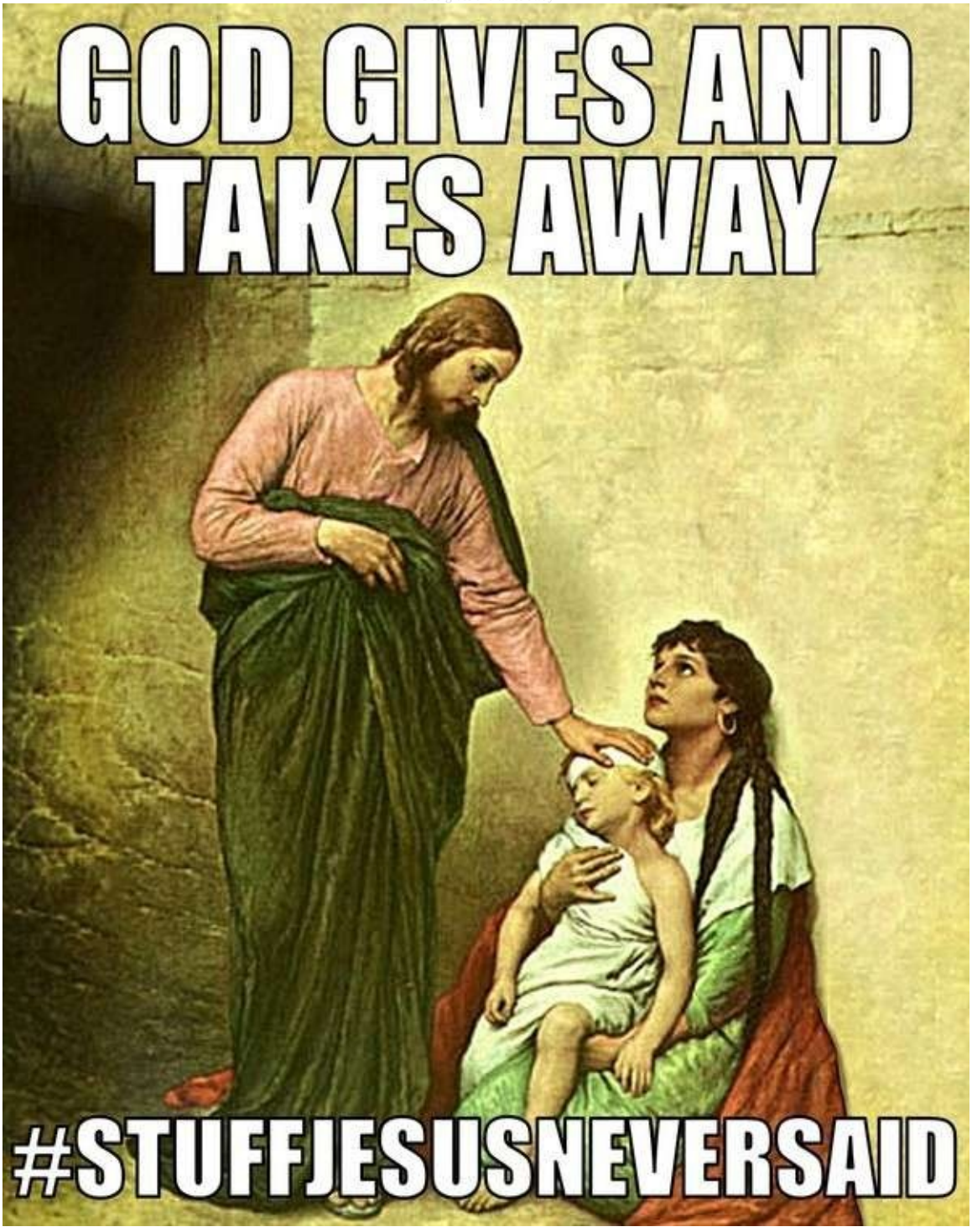
An armed gang came looking for Jesus. They carried swords and clubs and were ready to crack skulls. But Jesus' disciples had swords too and in the melee one of the thugs had his ear sliced off. Jesus said, "Everybody calm down." Then he touched the man's ear and healed him.

The woman was a law-breaker and the man was a hoodlum, yet both were healed. So were those who were oppressed by demons.

These stories tell us that nothing—no sin, no secret, no shame—can stop God revealing his love to us.

Whatever your need, his grace is your supply.

"Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." **Hebrews 4:16**



GOD GIVES AND GIVES

What Jesus did could fill a library of books, but what Jesus didn't do may be just as important.

Jesus didn't complain.

Jesus didn't blame God for bad things.

When Lazarus died, Jesus didn't say, "God took him."

There was a man in the Bible who suffered great loss and said, "God gives and takes away," but it wasn't Jesus.

When he met people who had lost things, Jesus never said, "God took your child. God took your health. God took your home."

Instead, he said, "I have come that you might have life to the full."

Jesus didn't take but he gave. He gave health to sick people and life to the dead. He gave love to the loveless and comfort to the afflicted. He gave sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed. And Jesus gave us a picture of a God who so loved the world that *he* gave.

God is not a thief, but a Giver who gives and gives and just when you think he's all done giving, he backs up the dump truck of his grace and gives you more.

And he never takes back his good gifts.

"God's gifts … are under full warranty—never canceled, never rescinded."
Romans 11:29 (MSG)

He loves you, he loves you not



UNCHANGEABLE LOVE

A Christless picture of God leads to muddled thinking: “Sometimes God is good to me, sometimes he isn’t. Sometimes he gives, sometimes he takes away. Sometimes he’s happy with me, sometimes he’s angry. Sometimes he’s for me,

sometimes he’s against me.”

But Jesus isn’t fickle and nor is his Father.

God never changes. The God who made the earth and gave it to us is always good to us. God’s love is greater than words. It’s so big that it can only be defined by what it isn’t. God’s love is uncontainable, unfathomable, unconditional.

The Apostle Paul prayed that we would know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. You might think you have a good handle on the love of Christ but his love exceeds your knowing. You are like Columbus who visited the New World yet never saw America’s great lakes, rivers, and forests. He died without ever seeing the Rocky Mountains, the Grand Canyon, or the Mississippi Valley.

Your heavenly Father loves you more than you can know or imagine. His love for you is relentless and unchangeable. It is furious and unfailing.

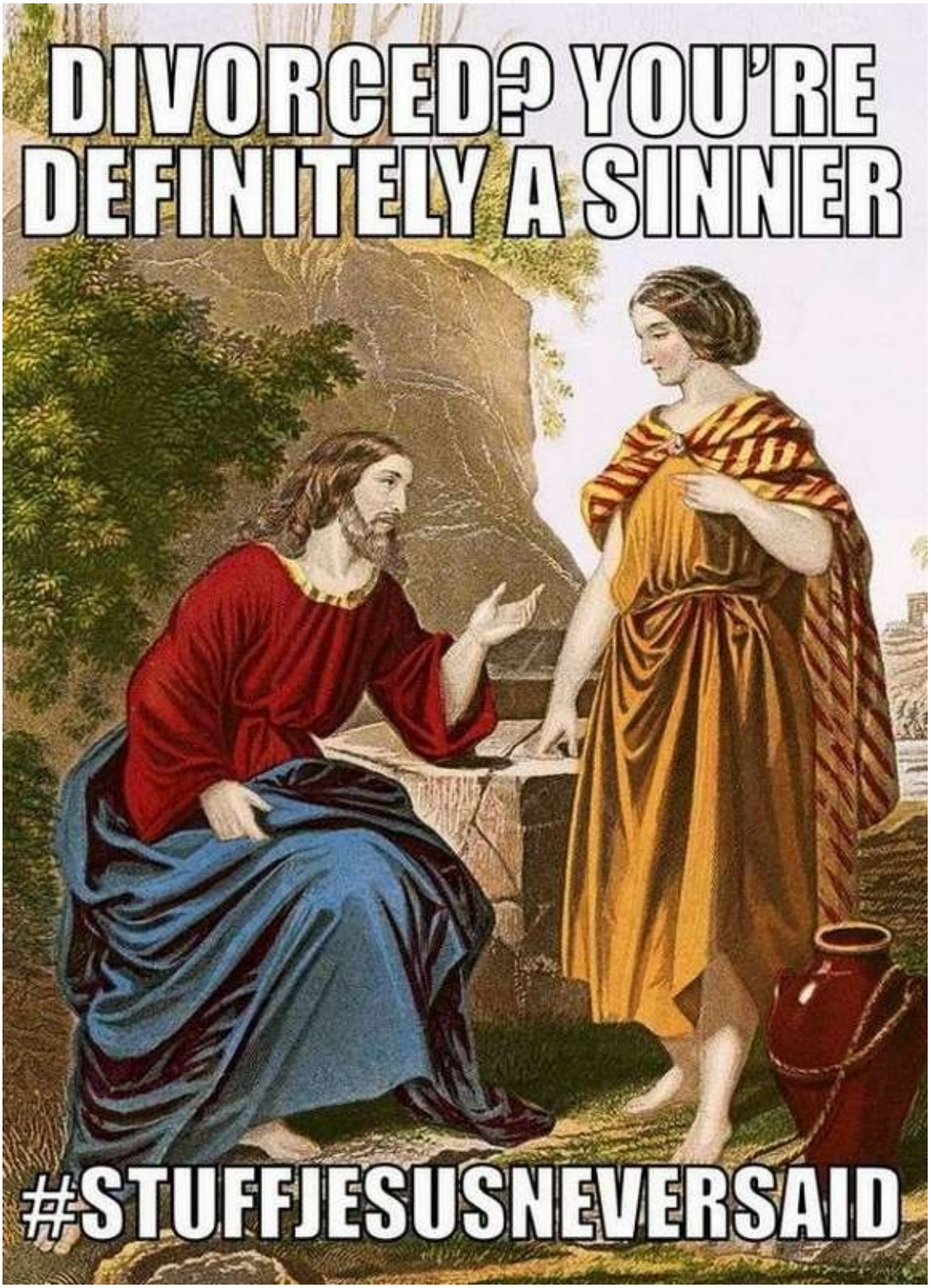
The ragamuffin evangelist Brennan Manning said, “I could more easily contain Niagara Falls in a teacup than I can comprehend the wild, uncontainable love of God.”

Jesus knew that Peter would deny him and that Judas would betray him, yet he loved his disciples to the end. His love for them never quit.

His love for you never fails.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” **Hebrews 13:8**

Divorced? You're definitely a sinner



JESUS STANDS WITH THE ACCUSED

In Biblical times there was a law that said a man could send his wife away with a certificate of divorce if she no longer found favor in his eyes. “She grew old and wrinkled, so I traded her in for a younger model.”

This was not a good law, and Jesus didn’t like it. When asked about it he basically said, “Moses gave you this law because you have rocks for hearts.”

It was a bad law for bad husbands. Worse, some of these heartless husbands were only obeying the first part of the law. They were sending out their wives without giving them a certificate of divorce.

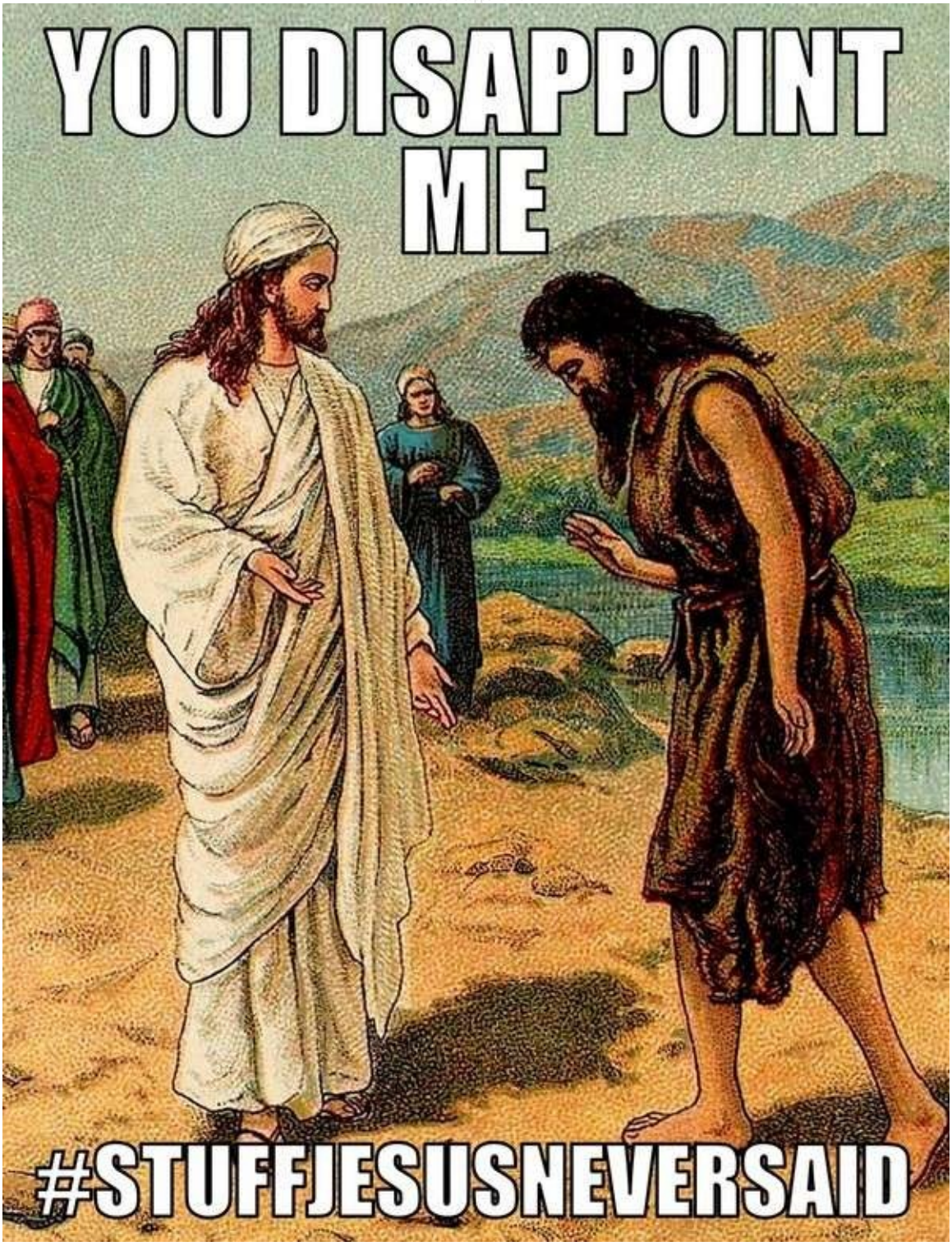
It was a rotten deal for women. Sent out into the cold with no means of support, they couldn’t remarry without committing adultery. They were in an impossible situation. Someone had to say something. Jesus did.

“Whosoever sends away his wife and marries another, commits adultery.” Jesus hammered these hard-hearted husbands with the very law they were exploiting. “You men think you’re clever, but you’re hurting women and breaking the law.”

In a religious culture obsessed with rules, divorced people are sometimes judged as second-class citizens, even adulterers. “As long as you sit quietly, you are welcome in our church. But you can never have a prominent role and don’t even think about looking for love. You had your shot, you blew it, and we will lovingly punish you for as long as we can.”

Where does Christ stand on this issue? As always, he stands with the accused, defending them and shielding them from the heavy stones of criticism and condemnation.

“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” **Romans 8:1**



GOD'S DREAMS COME TRUE

When we make mistakes it's natural to imagine that God is disappointed with us. We project our regrets upward and say, "I have let you down, and I know you are disappointed with me." But he isn't. It is impossible to disappoint God.

Since God knows everything you've ever done and will ever do, you can never surprise him or let him down. He knows what you did last summer, and he knows what you're going to do next winter. The amazing thing is not that he knows, it's that he loves you regardless.

"I knew you were going to do that, but my love for you is undimmed."

When Judas showed up with armed thugs in the garden, Jesus wasn't surprised. He didn't say, "Three years of quality time and now this? Judas, you disappoint me." Instead, he called him friend.

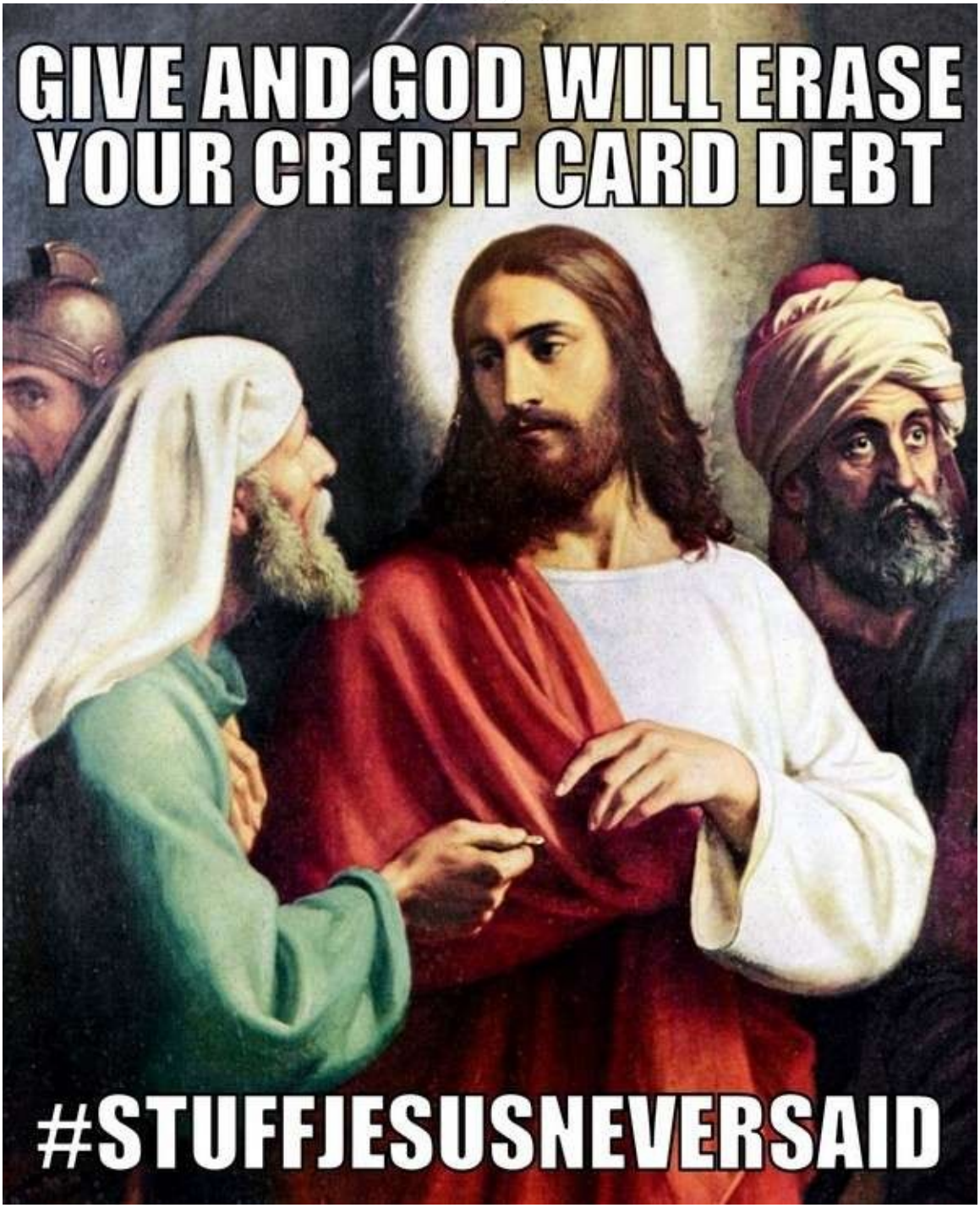
And when Peter denied Jesus three times, Jesus wasn't surprised. He didn't say, "You're a walking-talking disappointment." He said "Peace."

Don't ever imagine that God is disappointed with you. Disappointment is what happens when our hopes and dreams don't come true. Disappointment is what you get when reality falls short of expectations. God never has this experience. The one who sees the end from the beginning always expects what he gets and gets what he expects.

Do you know why God will never be disappointed with you? It is not because he has low expectations or no hopes and dreams for you. It's because his hopes and dreams always come true.

"My times are in your hands." **Psalm 31:15**

Give and God will erase your credit card debt



GOD IS NOT A SLOT MACHINE

“Sow into this ministry and you will reap threefold, sevenfold, even tenfold of

your investment.” You hear stuff like this on TV, but Jesus never said it. The God Jesus revealed is not a divine slot machine who rewards punters with payouts.

“You can’t out give God.” “Give and God will bless you.” “God is no man’s debtor.” When lines like these are used to promote giving, they destroy it, for giving-to-get is not giving at all.

“But didn’t Jesus say, ‘Give, and it shall be given unto you, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you’?”

Jesus was talking about our giving to each other. When we are generous with others, others will be generous with us. But if we’re stingy they won’t be. It’s the golden rule and it’s a good way to live.

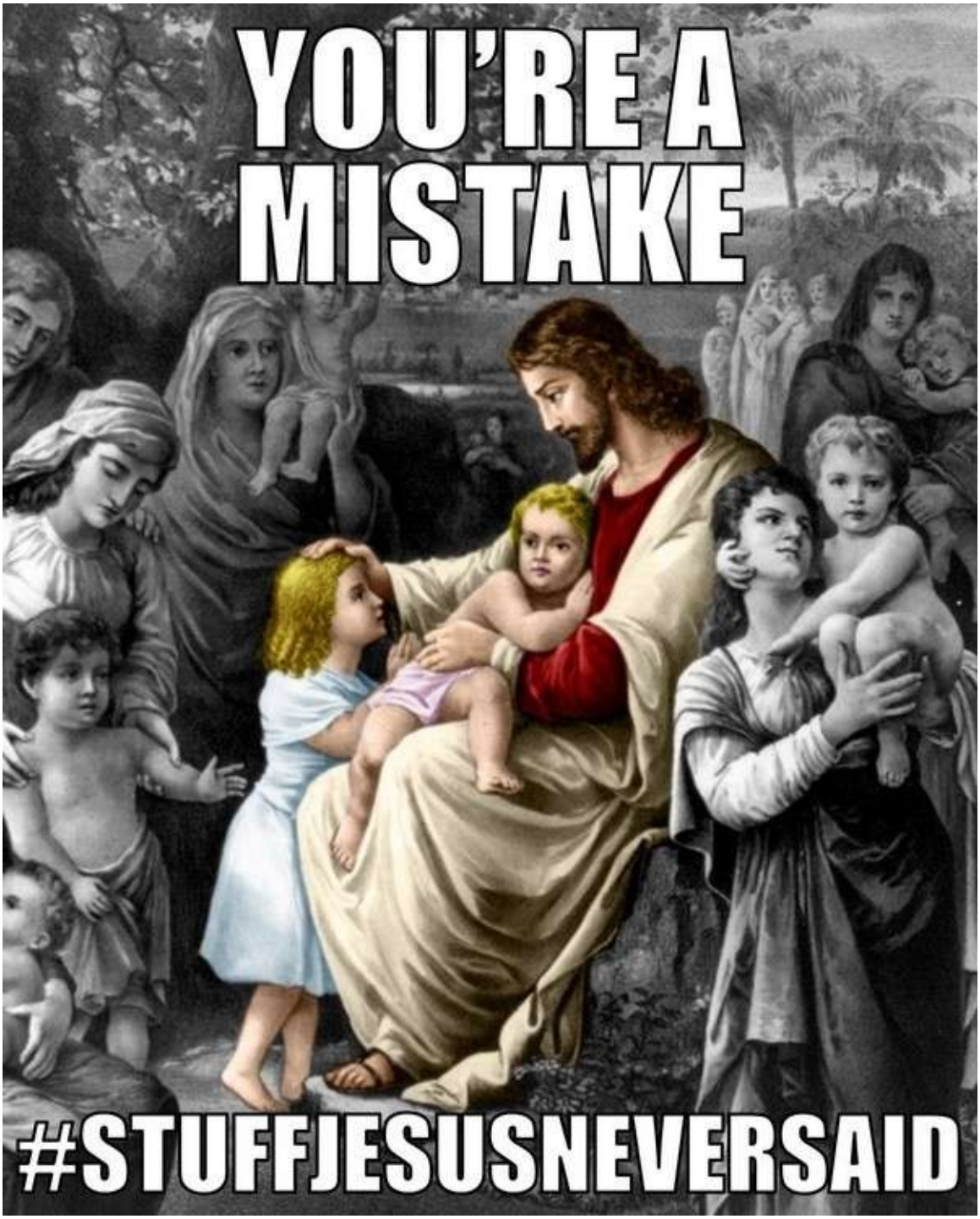
But God lives by a higher standard. He gives to us before we have given him a thing, and he gives with no expectation of reward. Why does he do it? Because God is love and love gives. God does not do debt, and God does not give to get. He gives because it’s his nature to give.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies, do good and lend to them without expecting to get anything back, then you will be children of the Most High.” When we give with no expectation of return we’re acting just like our Father.

The children of a generous Father don’t need to be prodded or manipulated into giving. They give because it’s in their nature. They give because God gave first.

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” **Acts 20:35**

You're a mistake



GOD BELIEVES IN YOU

Every investor knows that you shouldn't throw good money after bad. If an

investment turns sour, you cut your losses and walk away. So what does that tell us about a God who never writes us off but pursues us with love?

When Adam ate the forbidden fruit, God didn't wash his hands of the human race. And when you make mistakes, he doesn't zap you with lightning. Instead, he gives you grace.

Either God is a lousy investor, or he has faith in you. Big time. No matter what you've done, you are worth more to him than anything, even his own life. The cross is the proof. Before you had done anything good, Christ died for you.

Do you realize what this means? God believes in you!

You won't hear this message from those preaching self-improvement. Instead you will be asked, "Do you believe in God?" And if you hesitate to answer, you will be manipulated with carrots and sticks. "Believe and be blessed, deny and be damned."

But this is not love. Love makes no threats. Love doesn't force itself on others.

A back-to-front gospel says, "Believe or burn," but Jesus declares, "God believes in you." Is this not the greatest revelation of all? Everything God has ever done testifies to his love for us. The garden, the tree, the cross—he did it all because he loves us and believes in us and is not willing that any of us should perish. His enduring hope is that we will stop doubting his intentions and receive his love.

Your life might be one big mountain of mistakes, but you are not a mistake. You are the object of your Father's affection and the apple of his eye.

"You did not choose me, but I chose you." **John 15:16**



JESUS IS THE GREAT PHYSICIAN

The woman with the hemorrhage wasted her life's savings on doctors who couldn't heal her, then she met Dr. Jesus who could. And from this one story, good doctors have lost customers and good people have lost their lives.

There's no such thing as a bad healing. If medicine helps, take your medicine. If an x-ray is useful, get an x-ray.

Jesus had nothing against doctors and good doctors have nothing against Jesus. The two New Testament books containing the most stories of supernatural healing were both written by a doctor.

But beware the doctor who offers no hope. There is always hope. If medical science pronounces the sentence of death over you, get a second opinion. Go to Dr. Jesus. If your mind is anxious and afraid, find out what he says.

Jesus is the Great Physician. Nothing is too hard for him. Regular doctors give a measure of help, but the Great Physician gives great help. Not even death can stop him.

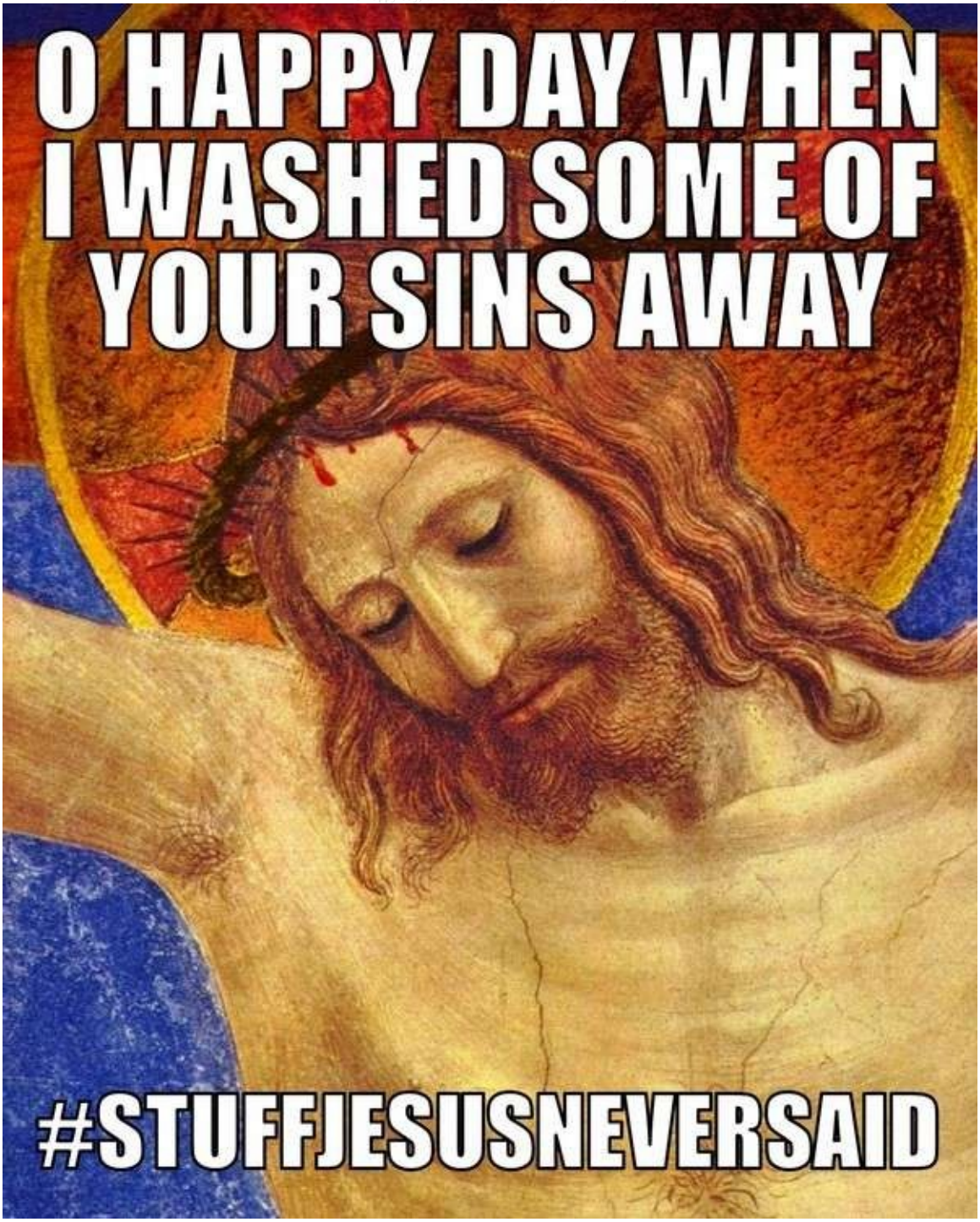
One time Jesus went to a house where a little girl lay dead. Mourners wailed, “She’s dead!” But the Great Physician gave a different diagnosis. “She’s sleeping.”

The mourners laughed. “You’re wrong about that,” they said. “She’s as dead as can be and beyond hope.” But the Great Physician didn’t listen. He sent the voices of unbelief outside and raised the little girl to life.

Doctors are good, doctors are helpful, and Jesus is the best doctor of all.

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.” **Matthew 9:12**

O happy day, when I washed some of your sins away



CHRIST CARRIED ALL YOUR SINS

After Jesus rose from the dead he instructed his disciples to proclaim the

forgiveness of sins to the whole world, beginning in Jerusalem. To forgive means to send away, which is what the Lamb of God did when he went to the cross. He carried our sins and bore them away.

Forgiveness is not something God does; it's something he's done. Past tense. Finished. Complete. Job done.

The apostles travelled the world proclaiming the forgiveness of sins. They encouraged people to receive the forgiveness provided by Jesus.

"Little children," said John, "I write to you because your sins are forgiven."

"My friends," said Paul in Asia Minor, "I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you."

However, some people didn't like this message of free forgiveness, and they drove Paul out of town. Even today there are those who say only some of your sins are forgiven. "God has forgiven your past sins, but your current and future sins demand payment."

But if the blood of Jesus did not pay for all your sins, what will?

Forgiveness is not something you earn through acts of piety or penance. Nor is it a debit card to draw upon as though God's grace was locked away. The forgiveness Jesus spoke of is a gift to receive and in Christ you have it.

"How far has the Lord taken our sins from us? Farther than the distance from east to west!" **Psalm 103:12 (CEV)**

When you do communion remember your sins



REMEMBER JESUS

Here are some things Jesus didn't say about communion. "When you take communion, take a moment to remember how you stole stationery from the office. Remember how you cursed that queue-jumper. Remember how you cheated on your tax. Remember how you looked at naughty stuff online.

"Remember how you didn't read the Bible this week. Remember how you fought with your spouse and yelled at the kids.

"Remember how you're a lousy human being."

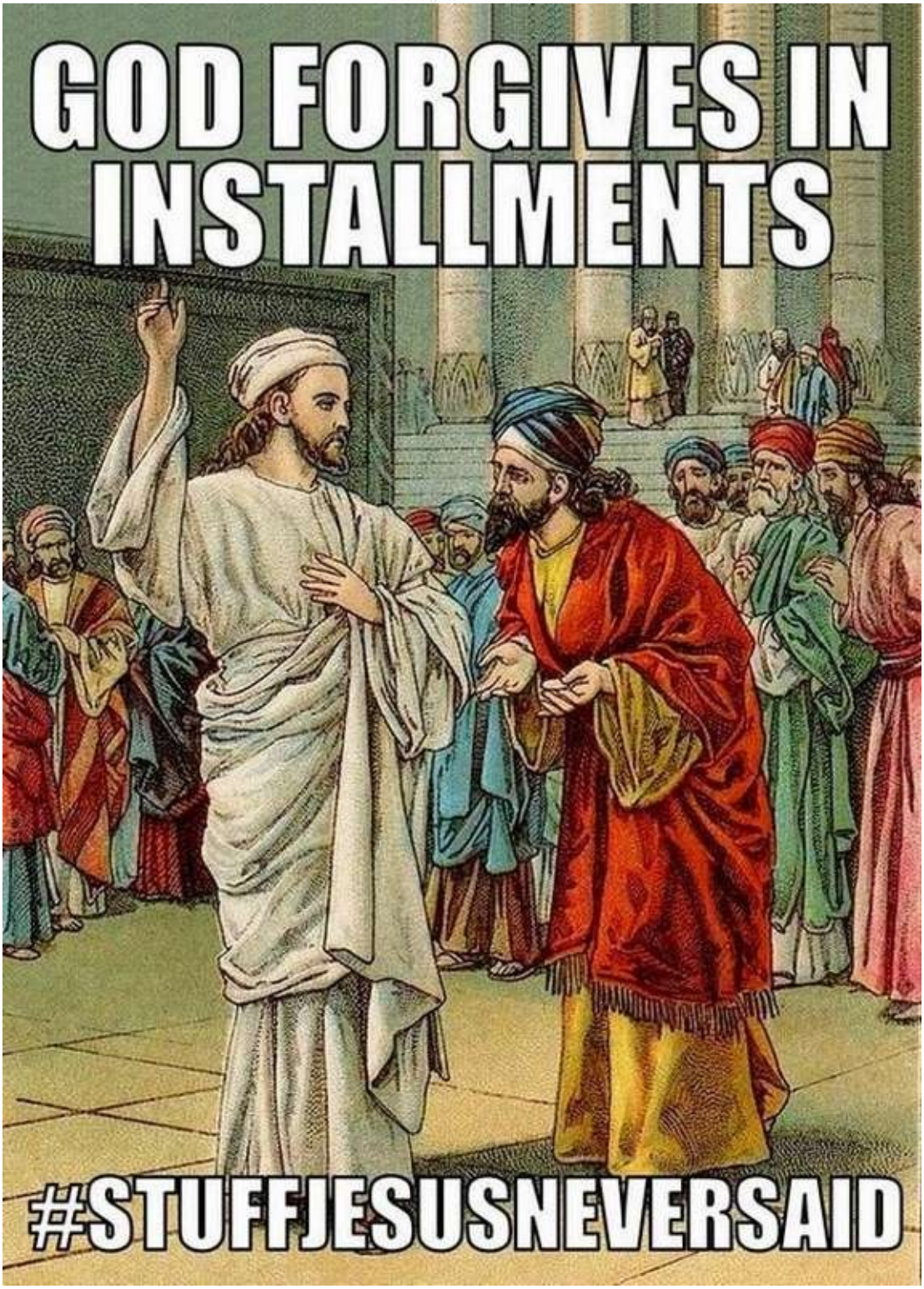
No, Jesus said none of that.

Instead, Jesus said something like this: “When you take communion, take a moment to remember my love that is greater than your failings. Remember my grace that trumps your sin. Remember my strength that shines in your weakness. Remember my supply that exceeds your needs.

“Remember my body, broken that you might be whole. Remember my blood, poured out that you might be forgiven.

“Remember me.”

“And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me’.” **Luke 22:19**



YOU ARE COMPLETELY FORGIVEN

A woman with a bad reputation showed up at a private dinner party and broke a jar of perfume over Jesus' feet. The host was shocked. "If Jesus were a prophet," he said to himself, "he'd know what sort of woman this was."

But Jesus did know for he said to the man, "Her sins, which are many, have been forgiven." Then turning to the woman he said, "Your sins are forgiven."

This woman was a sinner and then she wasn't. She had sins and then she didn't, because Jesus exchanged them for his gift of forgiveness.

The man was scandalized by Christ's forgiveness. It didn't make sense. "She's a sinner, not an upstanding citizen like me."

Perhaps he comforted himself by thinking, "God's given her a fresh start. Good for her. But to maintain her forgiveness she needs to straighten up and fly right, otherwise she'll fly right out of his forgiveness."

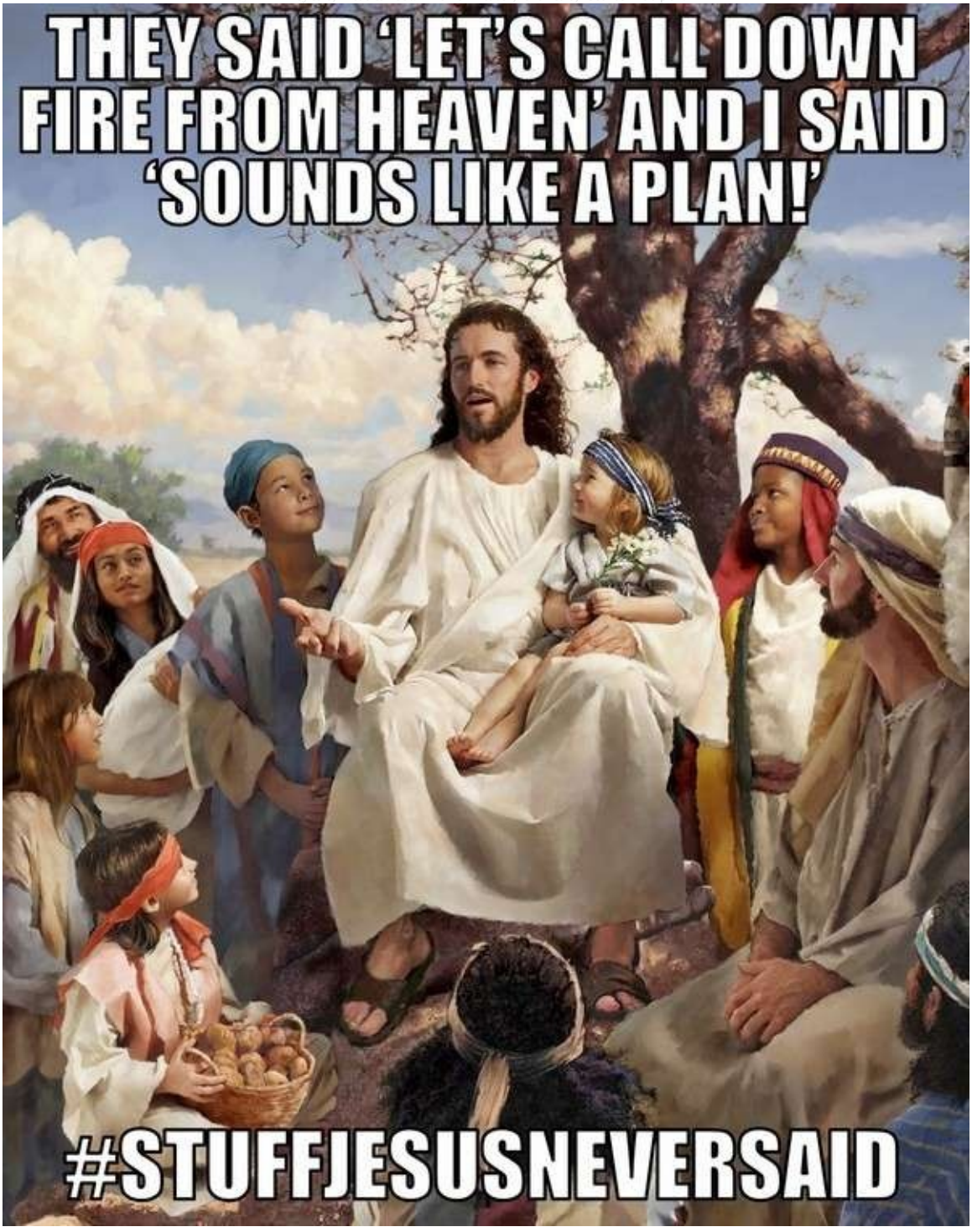
In other words, God's forgiveness is a fragile thing that falls apart at the first sign of trouble. You have to work to stay forgiven. You have to be good or God will unforgive you.

But that's not what Jesus said. "Your sins are forgiven," meaning all of them. Not just the ones you did yesterday, but those you did today and those you will do tomorrow.

You are forgiven. Jesus said so. Your forgiven-ness has nothing to do with how good you are, but how good he is.

"In him we have … the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace." **Ephesians 1:7**

They said, "Let's call down fire from heaven," and I said, "Sounds like a plan!"



JESUS CAME TO SAVE

Late one day, Jesus and the disciples came to a Samaritan village that refused them hospitality. “Lord, shall we call down fire from heaven, as Elijah did?” said James and John. Jesus rebuked them. “That’s not why I’m here. I came to save, not destroy.”

Since the time of Elijah hot-tempered men have tried to call down fire on their enemies, but not Jesus. He did not come to punish his enemies, but to rescue them.

“Love your enemies,” he said. “Do good to those who hate you.”

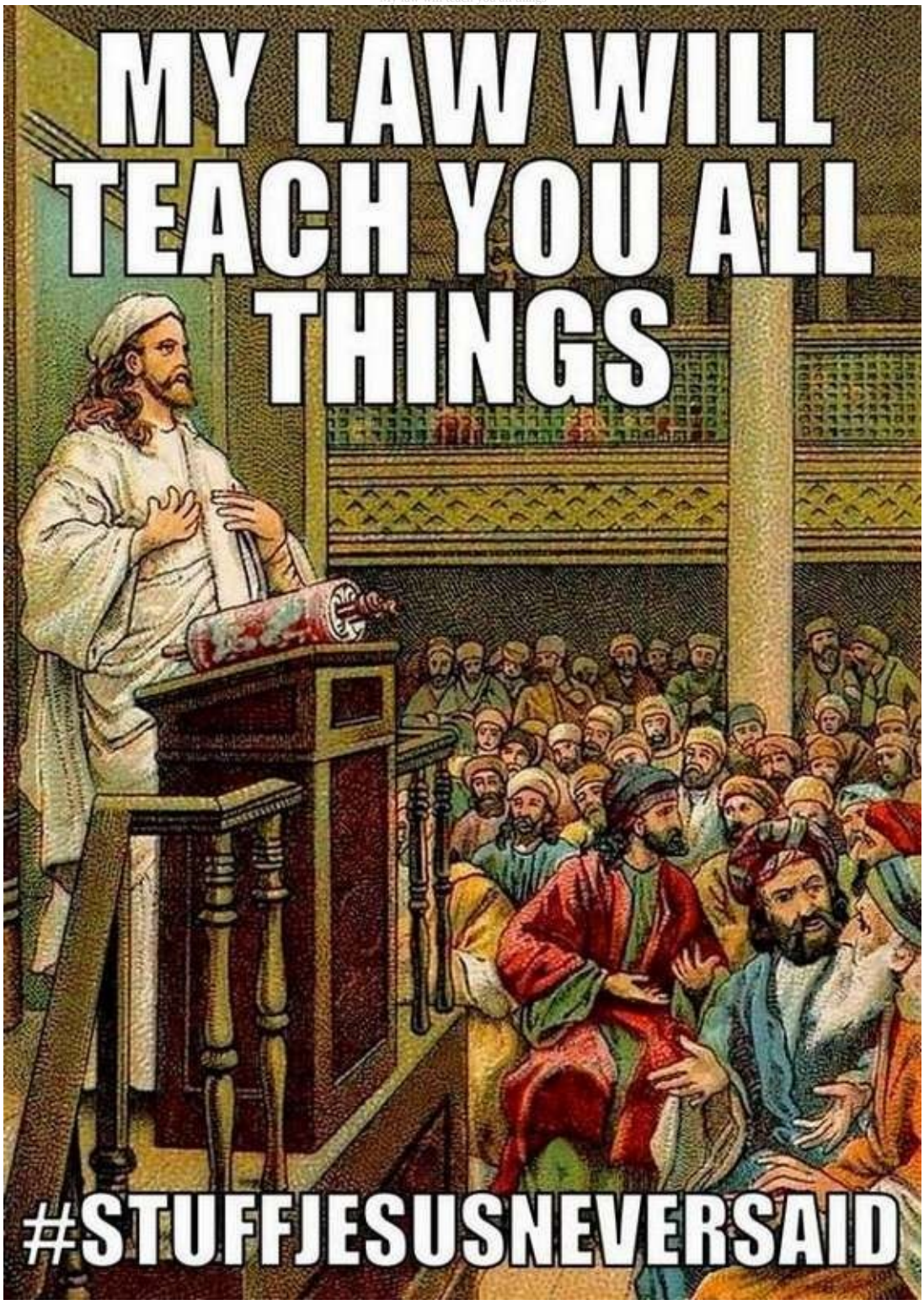
The Samaritans and Jews hated each other on account of religious differences. Jesus took no part in their dispute but loved indiscriminately. He ministered to Jews and Samaritans. To correct racial stereotypes he told the Jews stories where Samaritans were unexpectedly good guys.

In the end, Jesus was treated worse by his own tribe, the Jews. Yet even in death he refused to play the punishment game. Those who opposed him he loved to his dying breath, and when he rose from the dead he did not seek revenge.

In the narrative of your life you may see yourself as an enemy of God. When bad things happen you tell yourself, “God hates me. God is punishing me.”

But Jesus tells a different story. In his version you are not the villain but the unexpectedly good guy, worth loving, worth dying for.

“I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world.” **John 12:47**



THE LAW POINTS TO JESUS

Imagine you have a clumsy servant. For as long as he sits, his clumsiness is not apparent. But as soon as you give him something to do, the trouble begins. He spills the soup. He smashes a vase. He tumbles down the stairs and breaks his legs.

Ask him to do nothing, and the poor man is fine. But as soon as he is given an instruction, he goes to pieces. There is nothing wrong with the instruction. The problem is with the man. And so it is with us who are sinners by nature.

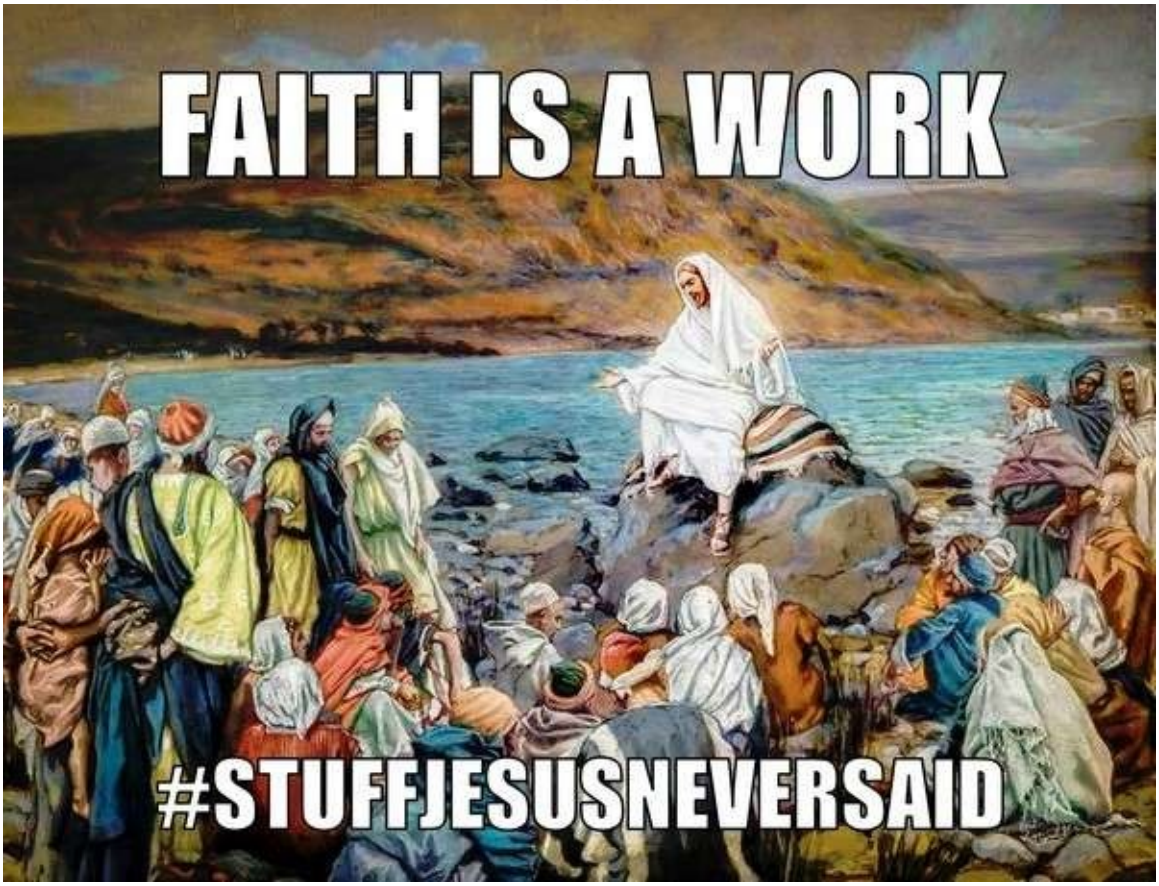
If God asks nothing of us, all seems to go well, but as soon as he demands something of us, the occasion is provided for a grand display of our sinfulness. We cannot live up to the standard. His requirements are too high. No matter how hard we try, we stumble and make a hash of things.

What does God's law teach us? One thing and one thing only: The law reveals our shortcomings. The law exposes our need for grace.

"But I'm doing my best." Your best is not good enough. God demands perfection and nothing less. Jesus said, "Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Perfection. What the law demands, Jesus supplies. Either you must be perfect, or have a high priest who is perfect for you.

"We have a high priest (Jesus) who perfectly fits our needs." **Hebrews 7:26 (MSG)**



FAITH IS A REST

Jesus and his disciples were crossing a lake when a squall blew up. Within minutes the boat was swamped and their lives were in danger. The disciples leapt into action. They furled and rowed and bailed and achieved absolutely nothing.

When all seemed lost the disciples woke the Lord. With a word he rebuked the wind and the storm subsided. Then he rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith.

The disciples worked and Jesus slept and only one of them had faith.

Faith is not a work but a rest. Faith is being persuaded that God is who he says he is and will do what he said he would.

At the start of their boat trip, the Son of God said, “Let us go to the other side.” This was the word of the Lord, but the disciples weren’t persuaded. “We’re not going anywhere but down.” Being unpersuaded, they worked hard and achieved nothing. But Christ, being fully persuaded, could sleep in peace.

This is why faith is a rest. When you are fully persuaded about what God has promised, the issue is settled. Your mind is made up and your heart is at ease. But if you are not persuaded, you’ll be restless. You’ll try instead of trust. You’ll be panicky instead of peaceful.

Faith is not something you must do or manufacture. Faith is resting in the restful persuasion that God is greater than our storms. Faith is refusing to panic and choosing to trust that he will safely bear us to the other side.

“We who have believed enter his rest.” **Hebrews 4:3 (paraphrase)**

You miscarried? God needed another angel in heaven



GRACE IS FOR CHILDREN

When Jesus heard that Jairus' little girl had died, he did not say, "She was sick—her death is a mercy." When Jesus met a widow on her way to bury her son, he did not comfort her with, "God took him because you loved him too much."

And if Jesus had met a mother who had miscarried her child, he would not have uttered lines like these:

"God wasn't ready for your baby to be born."

"God needed another flower for his bouquet."

"There must have been something wrong with your child. This was a blessing in disguise."

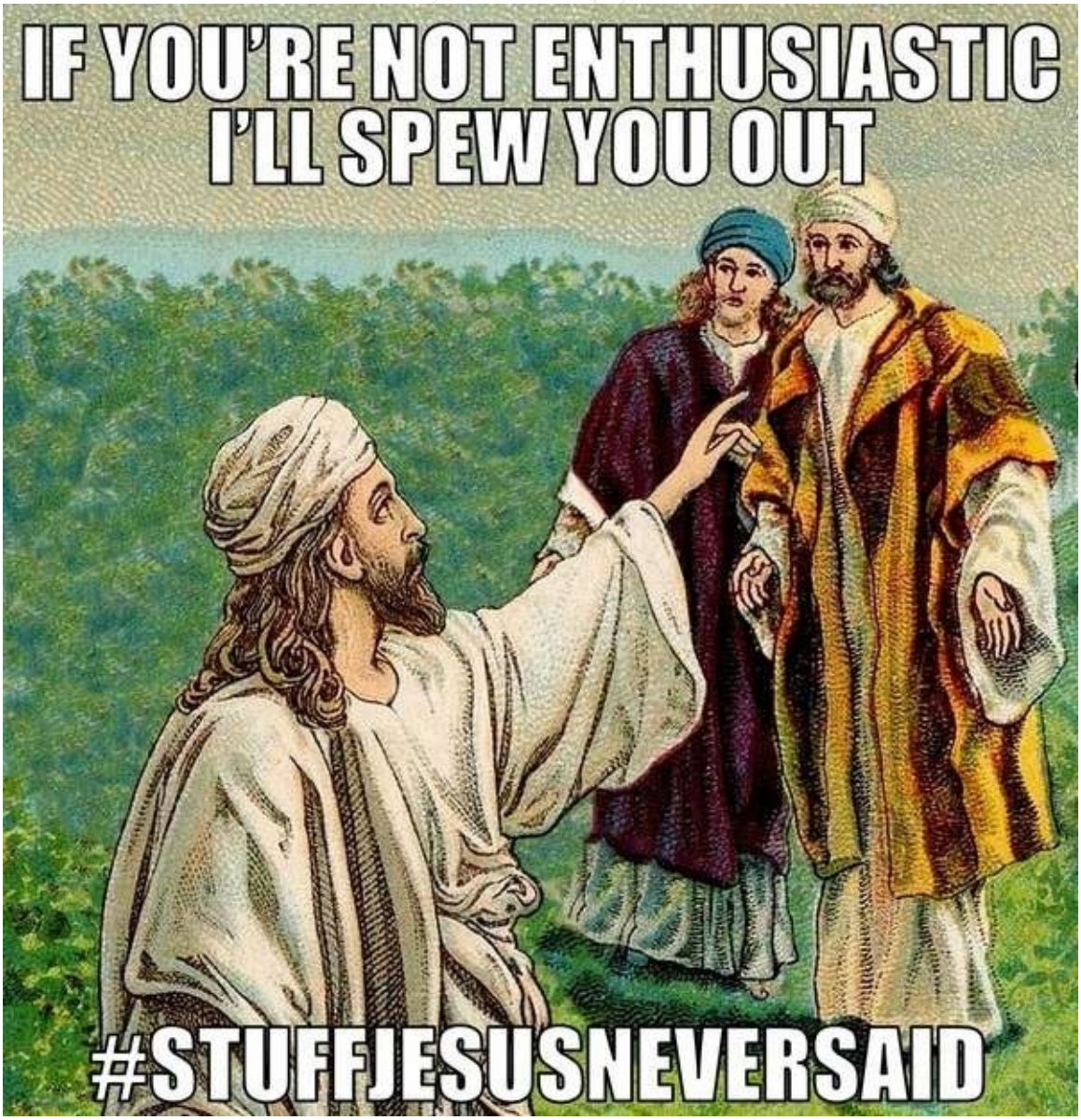
Jesus never blamed God or suggested his hand was behind the loss of a child. A miscarriage might happen for a number of reasons, but God needing another angel in heaven is not one of them.

Some have this idea that death is one of God's tools, but Jesus hated death. He told the widow not to cry, yet he wept at the tomb of Lazarus. He told Jairus not to be afraid, yet he was overwhelmed with sorrow in the garden. But on the cross the Author of life bore our sins and removed the sting of death. Because of Jesus, death is no longer something to fear.

What happens to babies who die? They go to be with Jesus, every single one. Because if grace is for anyone, it's for the least and the lost.

"The kingdom of God belongs to such as these." **Luke 18:16**

If you’re not enthusiastic I’ll spew you out



JESUS WANTS YOU TO REST

If God gave points for enthusiasm the disciples would be in trouble. On the night when Christ needed them most, they fell asleep on the job. Then when trouble came they ran like frightened kittens.

Yet instead of condemning the disciples for being lousy, lukewarm friends, Christ died for them. Then he rose from the dead and cooked them breakfast.

In our performance-mad world it's easy to believe that Jesus wants us to work harder, run faster, and jump higher. But more than ever we need to hear him say, as he did to the disciples, "Come with me to a quiet place and get some rest."

When Jesus said the lukewarm would be spat out, he was talking about the dangers of mixing hot with cold. To be lukewarm is to mix that which should never be mixed. It's mixing the new covenant of grace with the old covenant of works. It's mixing the rest Christ offers with the ceaseless demands of the law. It's mixing the unbreakable promises of God with the brittle promises of man.

Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher of the Victorian era, worried about those who muddled the good news of grace with the bad news of the law.

"Most of them make a mingle-mangle, and serve out deadly portions to the people, often containing but one ounce of gospel to a pound of law, whereas even a grain of law is enough to spoil the whole thing."

What makes Jesus sick? It's mixing grace with law, his sacrifice with yours. It's saying, "Jesus, I got this. You started it, but I'll finish it. You can't do this, but I can."

Such talk is nauseating to Jesus and deadly to us.

"Only crazy people would think they could complete by their own efforts what was begun by God." **Galatians 3:3 (MSG)**



GRACE GIVES YOU WINGS

A woman, caught in the act of adultery, is brought to Jesus for judgment. She's as guilty as sin. In the eyes of the law, she is condemned to die.

But with wisdom that silences her accusers, Jesus saves the woman's life.

"I don't condemn you," said Jesus. "Go now and leave your life of sin." This was not a threat, but a declaration of freedom. "Leave your prison of sin."

When you sin you will have many accusers. Your conscience will accuse you. The law will accuse you. The judge and jury will accuse you. But Jesus will never accuse you. Instead, he speaks in your defense. "Charge this sin to my account, and let the accused go free." And God the Judge announces in a voice that will not be overruled, "Case dismissed!"

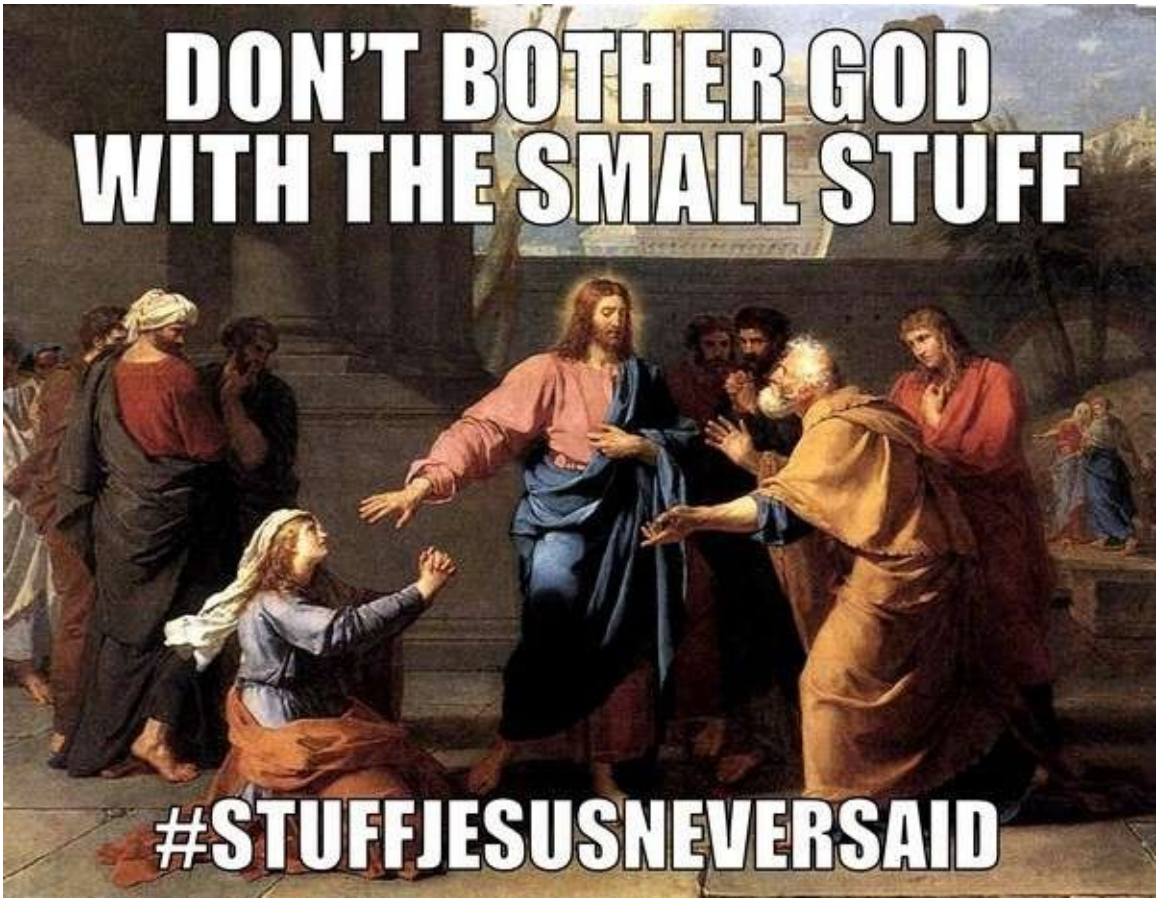
Such good news is hard to believe. "But your honor, you don't know what I've done. I've done some bad stuff."

And the court of heaven replies, "No, you don't know what Christ has done. He who knew no sin became sin so that you who were never righteous might become righteous." It's a divine exchange, his life for yours.

This is what grace looks like. Grace breaks the bonds of sin and removes the yoke of guilt. Grace lifts us from the clay and sets us on the rock. Grace draws our gaze heavenward and gives us wings to fly.

"If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." **1 John 2:1 (NKJV)**

Don’t bother God with the small stuff



IF IT MATTERS TO YOU IT MATTERS TO HIM

God measures the heavens with the span of his hand. He calls the stars by name. His vastness is beyond comprehension, yet Jesus said our heavenly Father cares about even the smallest details of our lives. “He knows the number of hairs on your head.”

“But I don’t want to disturb God with my problems. I’m sure he’s got better things to do.”

He’s your Father. If it matters to you it matters to him.

“But he is so big and my problems are small.”

It’s all small stuff to the Maker of heaven and earth. From his perspective, there are no big problems.

“So it’s okay to pray?”

Prayer is the cure for worry. “Seek God first,” said Jesus, “and he will take care of you.”

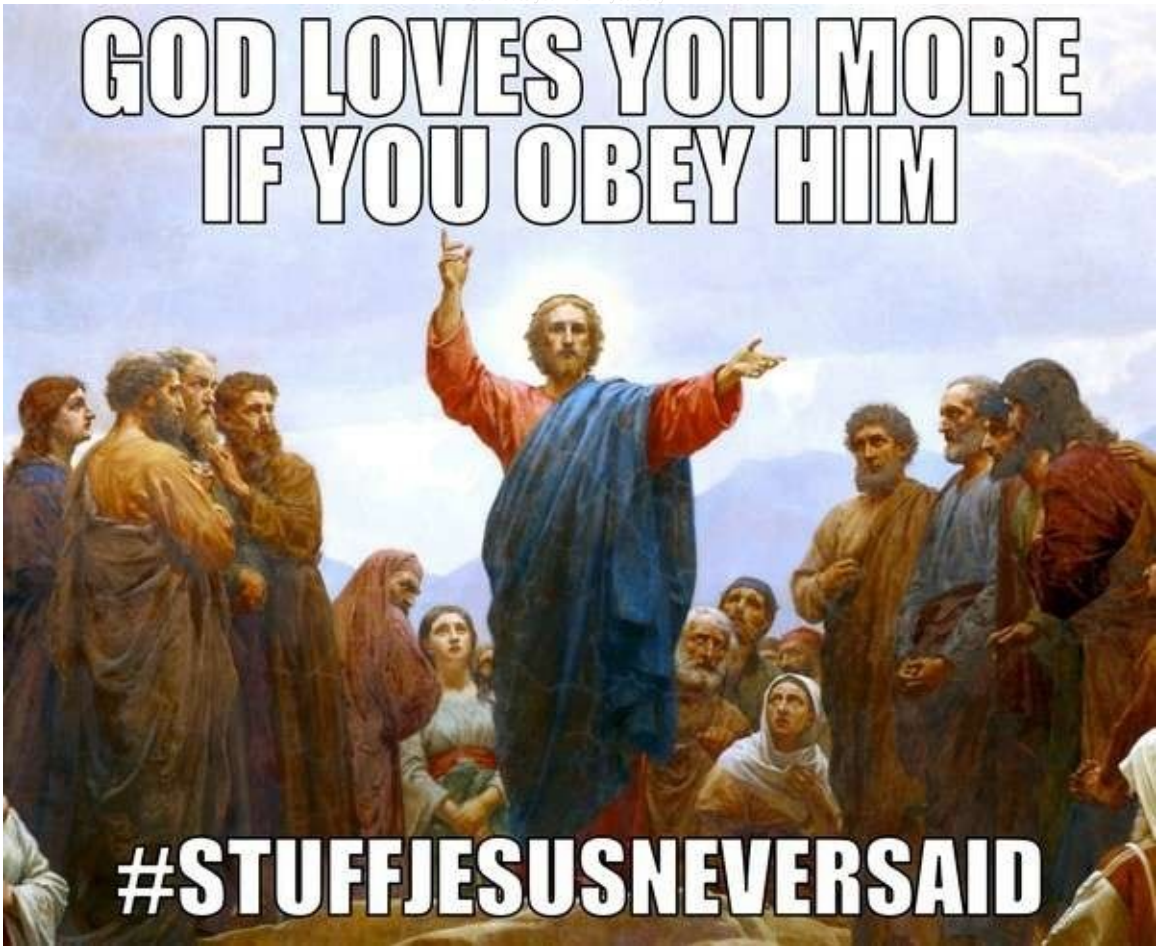
“But I don’t know how to pray.”

Prayer is simply talking to your heavenly Father. It’s drawing close in love and gratitude knowing that he cares for you.

Prayer is kissing your Daddy’s face.

“Cast all your cares upon the Lord, for he cares for you.” **1 Peter 5:7 (paraphrase)**

God loves you more if you obey him



LOVE LIKE SUNSHINE

“God demonstrates his love in a profound way,” said Paul to the Romans. “While we were sinners, Christ died for us.” Even though we wanted nothing to do with him, he loved us. Even though we broke every rule in his book, he loved us. Even though we spat on him, abused him, and nailed him to a cross, he loved us.

So why do we think we can make God love us any more than he already does?

The love of God is like sunshine. Your behavior has no bearing on it. God doesn’t love you any more when you do good or any less when you do bad. Your behavior only affects your enjoyment of his love.

“You have left your first love,” said Jesus to the church at Ephesus. The Ephesians were so busy that they had forgotten who was their source and sustenance. They were stressed and anxious, no longer resting in their Father’s love.

The cares and worries of life can distract us, even make us ill. When we lose sight of God’s love for us we become susceptible to the seductions of lesser things. How do we find our way back? “Remember the high sunlit place from where you have fallen. Return, and do what you did at first.”

What did we do when we first realized how much our Father loves us? Not much. We didn’t strive, we didn’t toil, and we didn’t bust our humps trying to please him. We just enjoyed him. We basked in his unconditional love and reveled in his grace.

“Do that,” says Jesus. “Don’t return to the wilderness of works, but make your home in the sunny place of his unmerited favor.”

“We love because he first loved us.” **1 John 4:19**

Sinner? God can't hear you



GOD HEARS YOUR UNSPOKEN PRAYERS

“God doesn’t listen to sinners. He only listens to the godly man who does his will.” So said a man in the Bible, but it wasn’t Jesus.

Jesus listened to thieves, harlots, demoniacs, Samaritans, Romans, beggars, governors, and religious extremists. More than listen, Jesus went out of his way to help those dismissed as sinners. Indeed, this was his mission. “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Don’t ever think that God won’t hear you because you haven’t been good. Don’t buy into the lie that says your heavenly Father doesn’t care. God cares so much that he hears even our unspoken prayers. Consider these stories from Jesus’ life:

Zacchaeus was a man with enemies. He needed a friend so Jesus invited himself for lunch.

The woman at the well had been shamed by rejection. She needed acceptance and found Jesus waiting to meet her.

The woman caught in adultery had moments to live. She needed a Savior and was literally carried to Christ who saved her.

A thief, a cast-off, and an adulterer. We don’t know if they ever prayed, but we do know that the cries of their hearts, whether spoken or unspoken, were heard by a God who cares.

“Everyone who calls, ‘Help, God!’ gets help.” **Romans 10:13 (MSG)**



JESUS TOOK OUR SICKNESS

Jesus said, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” Jesus is the perfect likeness of God. Like Father, like Son. If you want to know what God the Father is like, look to God the Son. Jesus is God explaining himself to the human race.

If you have questions about God, you’ll find answers in his Son. For instance, how many people did Jesus give sickness to? Answer: zero.

Since the Son of God is the exact likeness of God the Father, how many people does God make ill? Same answer.

Don’t ever think that God is behind your illness. Don’t tell yourself, “God made me sick for a reason,” or, “God gave me this illness to teach me patience.” He

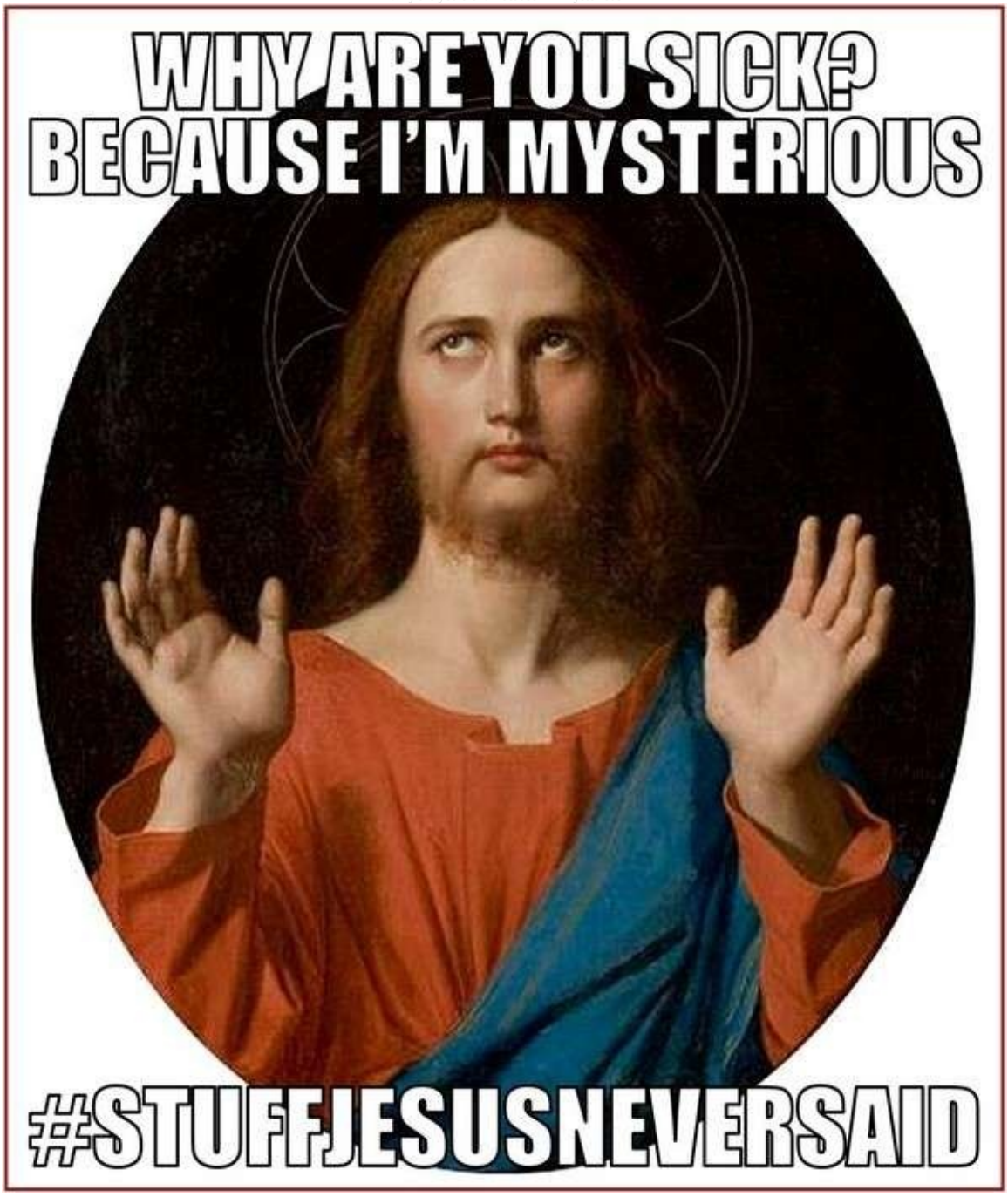
didn’t. What sort of father gives his children epilepsy or bipolar disorders to teach them stuff?

Jesus never made anyone sick. Jesus will never make you sick.

Jesus made sick people well. Jesus can make you well.

“Jesus healed all who were sick. He did this to make come true what the prophet Isaiah had said, ‘He himself took our sickness and carried away our diseases’.”
Matthew 8:16–17 (GNB)

Why are you sick? Because I'm mysterious



THE PRISON OF EXCUSES

Jesus healed everyone who came to him. He had a one-hundred percent success rate. But sometimes we don't see it. "I prayed, but I'm still sick." When that

happens, disappointment can set in.

Why didn't it work? Why didn't I get better?

We cast about for reasons and reason provides them. Jesus is retired. He doesn't heal anymore. Healing was for then, not for now. You don't have enough faith. You're not desperate enough. There's sin in your life. God wants you to be sick. He is trying to teach you something. He's mysterious. Who can fathom his ways?

Excuses like these may bring shallow comfort, but they don't heal us. They reduce us to spectators on the sidelines of our own lives.

Jesus prayed for a blind man twice. After the first prayer the man could see, but not perfectly. Jesus didn't give up. He didn't say, "I tried, I failed. This healing shtick doesn't work." Nor did he cast about for excuses. "There must be some sin you haven't confessed. Maybe God's using your illness to teach you how to endure."

Nope. Jesus prayed a second time and the man was totally healed.

Haven't received your healing? Don't give up. Don't surrender to the prison of excuses. Don't be downcast and disappointed but fix your eyes on Jesus.

"Heal the sick." **Matthew 10:8**

Don't ask questions



ASK AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

A famous preacher once said, "Christians, like slaves and soldiers, don't ask questions." In other words, do what you're told and don't make trouble. "How dare you question God?"

But Jesus said, "Ask and you shall receive." Asking questions is healthy. It's how we grow. When we stop asking, we stop growing.

Jesus said we come to his kingdom like little children. Children ask questions all the time: Why is the sky blue? Why do ladybugs have spots? Where do thoughts come from? Do sharks know they are evil? Why do we see only one thing if we have two eyes? What's outside the universe? Why don't fish have eyebrows?

A good father delights in the questions of his children, for he knows that good

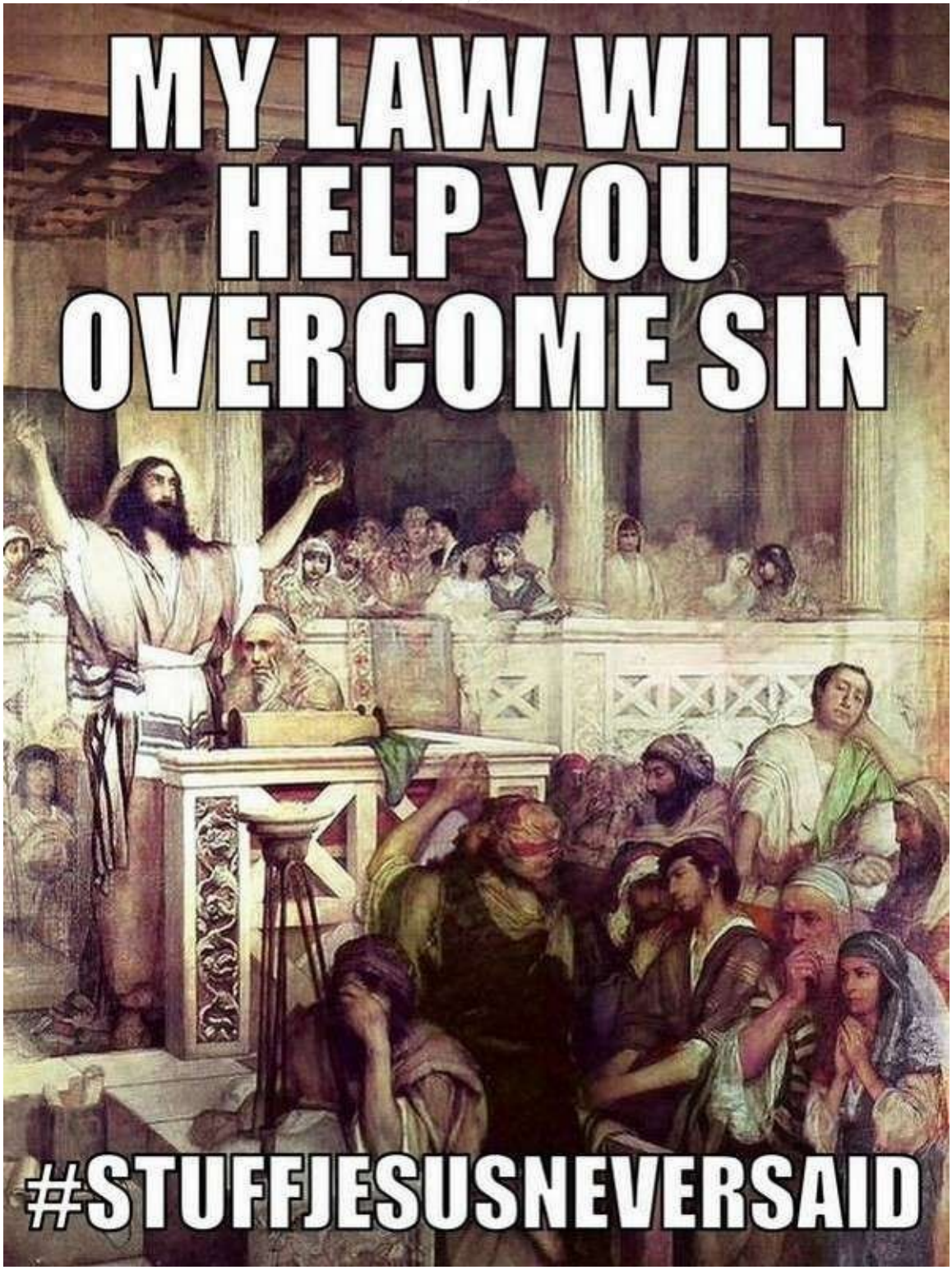
questions are doors to discovery. They are keys that unlock treasure.

The problem is we don’t ask so we don’t receive. The door stays shut and the treasure stays locked.

God loves it when you ask questions: Who filled the earth with wonders and cloaked the universe in mystery? Who made the galaxies spin and packed the tiny atom with energy? Who set up the water cycle and mixed the cocktail we call air? Who showed the migrating bird how to cross the ocean or the salmon how to find his way home? Who taught the insects to pollinate our food and gave us taste buds to enjoy it? Who made us curious and inventive? Who made women unfathomable and children unpredictable?

God loves good questions because ultimately our questions lead to him.

“Everyone who asks receives.” **Matthew 7:8**



THE LAW IS NOT YOUR FRIEND

The laws in scripture are good, but they have no power to make you good. Consider the law-experts of Christ's day. They knew the law better than anyone, yet Jesus called them hypocrites and white-washed tombs.

Jesus esteemed the law and the purpose for which it was given. The law was not given to help you overcome sin, but to help sin overcome you.

To those who trusted in their observance of the law, Jesus gave more law. "You have heard it said … but I say unto you …" They were like gym-junkies admiring their moral muscle in the mirror of the law, until Jesus added ten tons of weight and said, "Press this."

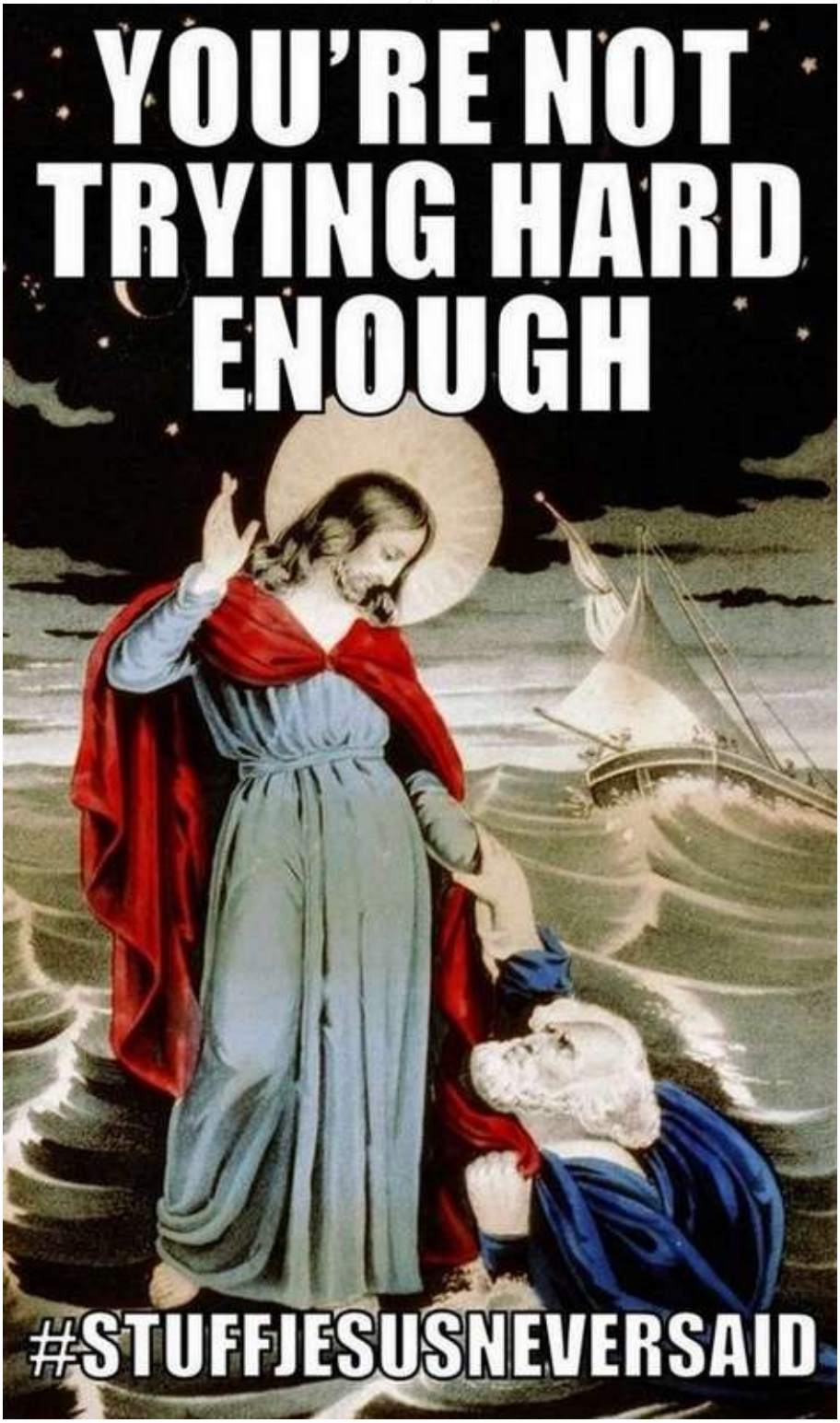
In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the teachers of the law, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven." This is the bad news that paves the way for the good news: the righteousness we all need comes to us as a free gift, paid for by Jesus.

Jesus has done the heavy lifting and you don't need to press a thing.

The choice is clear: you can trust in your observance of the law or you can trust in Christ. The law ministers death, but Jesus gives life. The law condemns, but Jesus justifies.

The law is not your friend, but Jesus is the best friend you've got.

"The power of sin is the law." **1 Corinthians 15:56**



IT'S HIS FRUIT WE BEAR

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed on the ground. “Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how.”

The seed grows all by itself. The farmer doesn’t make it happen. But if he tries to make the seed grow, by digging it up or tugging on the stalk, he’ll ruin the harvest.

Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” We can’t bear his fruit, and we can’t make ourselves grow. From start to finish, he does it all. But we can sabotage that process by trying to make things happen.

We hear, “Produce fruit or God will chop you off,” and before you know it we are trying instead of trusting. We’re digging up the seed, tugging on the stalk, and ruining the harvest.

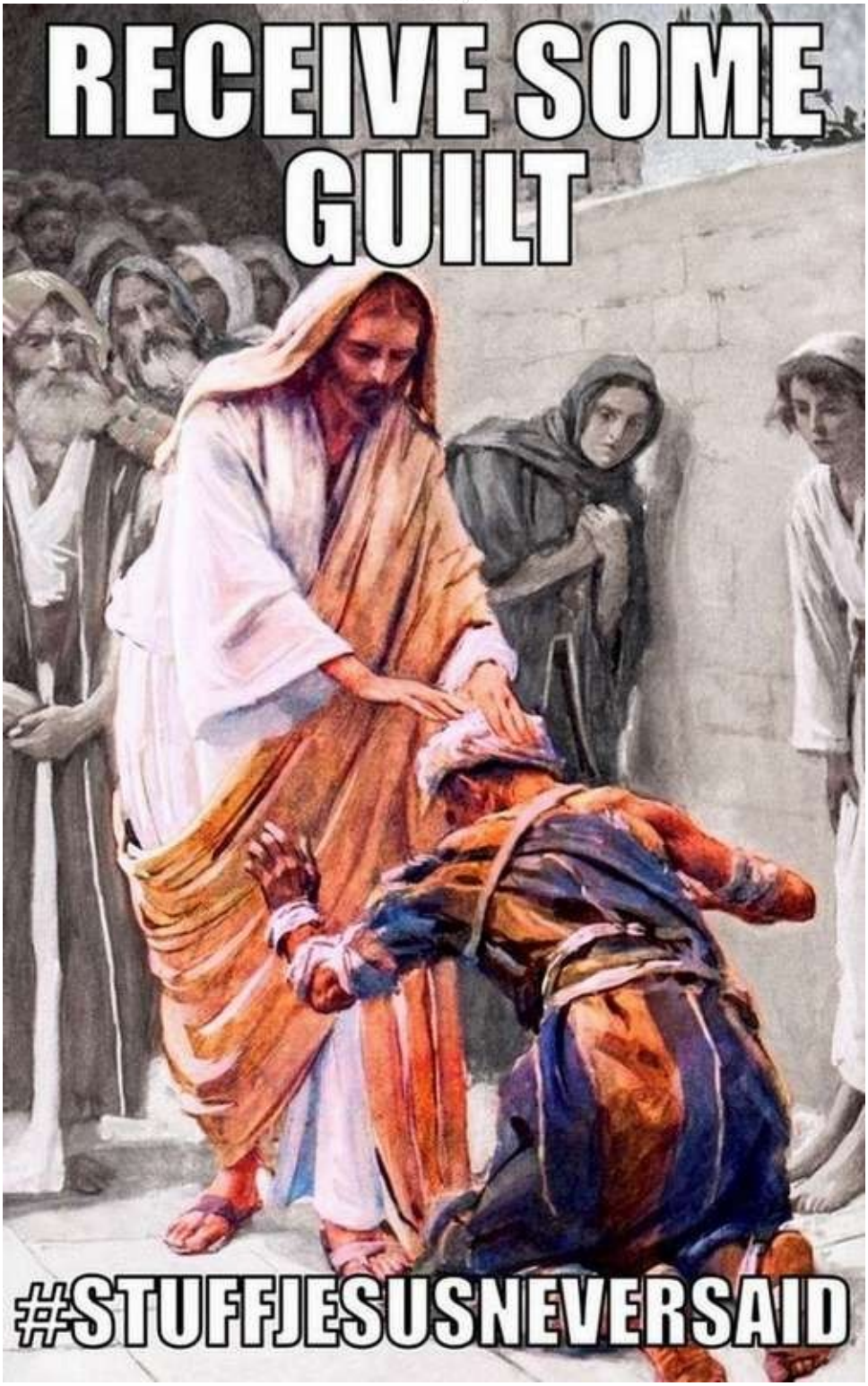
How do we live the life that is found in Christ?

“It is remembering that Jesus is the Vine,” said Hudson Taylor, “The root, stem, branches, twigs, leaves, flowers, fruit, all indeed. I have not got to make myself a branch. The Lord Jesus tells me I am a branch. I am part of him and I have just to believe it and act upon it.”

How do we bear his fruit in our lives? By not trying. By learning to rely on his love and trusting in the Father’s pruning.

It’s his fruit we bear.

“Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit.” **John 15:5 (GNB)**



JESUS IS FOR YOU

In small amounts guilt is not a bad thing. Guilt signals a hurt that needs to be mended. “Oh no, I forgot your birthday.” “I feel bad because I lost my temper.” But in a world that worships performance, guilt has gotten out of control.

We feel guilty for things we did do and things we didn’t. We feel guilty when we’re early and when we’re late. We feel guilty when we fail and when we do well. (I could’ve done better.) No matter what we do, guilt never goes away. Like an alarm that won’t switch off, guilt is the soundtrack to our lives.

In Jesus’ day, the religious leaders tried to motivate people with guilt. In the name of a God they did not know, they burdened people with rules they couldn’t keep, then punished them when they failed to perform. “You’re a miserable sinner. You’re letting God down.”

Guilt may be the *lingua franca* of rule-based religion, but it wasn’t a language that Jesus spoke. In countless encounters with those judged “sinners” not once did he condemn, criticize, or point the finger of blame. He never sent anyone on a guilt trip.

On one occasion the religious leaders brought out a woman who had broken the rules. Her guilt was undeniable, unquestionable, irrefutable. Surely Jesus would have no choice but to agree with their guilty verdict. But he didn’t. He said, “I don’t condemn you.”

In this world there is no shortage of critics and stone-throwers. But Jesus sings a different tune. He speaks words of grace and forgiveness that heal and empower us to live well. Hear him.

“Everyone has sinned … but by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus.” **Romans 3:23–24 (GNB)**

If you don’t tithe God will take it off you in doctor’s bills



HE’S GOD YOUR FATHER, NOT THE GODFATHER

“God will bless you if you tithe, but curse you if you don’t.”

“Giving provides supernatural protection for your finances.”

“If you don’t tithe, you open the door to the devourer.”

Perhaps you have heard claims like these, but Jesus never said them. They’re lines from gangster movies. “Pay up or you could have an unfortunate accident.”

Jesus is not a mobster selling protection. He will never ask you for a bribe or

threaten to send you to the hospital.

“What about when Jesus told the healed man, ‘Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you’?” That was a life-giving warning as in, “Stop smoking or you may get lung cancer,” or, “Stop texting on the freeway lest you crash.”

Death is sin’s wage, not God’s gift. Sin kills; God gives life.

God wants to heal you, not make you ill. He desires to bless you, not curse you. And the good news that Jesus revealed is that God blesses us without regard to our giving. “He makes his sun to shine on good and bad people alike.”

God loves a cheerful giver, not a fearful giver. There’s no fear in love, and love makes no threats.

“The Lord longs to be gracious to you.” **Isaiah 30:18**

Your sickness is a blessing in disguise



JESUS IS YOUR BLESSING

A mind burdened with sickness can lose perspective. You may think, “I’m going

to die," even though you're not. Or you may say, "This sickness is a blessing," even though it isn't.

Arthritis is not a blessing. Bulimia is not a blessing. Cancer is not a blessing. But if you believe your illness is a blessing, it can keep you from being blessed.

The Bible is full of stories about people who came to Jesus for healing. But did you ever wonder about the folks who stayed home? When Jesus passed by they didn't yell to get his attention, like the blind beggar in Jericho. They didn't push through the crowd or have their friends lower them through roofs.

Jesus healed all who came to him, but in Nazareth not many were healed. Why not? Not all came to him. Some held back. They had made peace with their illnesses. They dismissed Jesus as merely "Joseph's son" and didn't see him as their healer.

Jesus might have said, "Free healing. Come and get yours!" But they replied, "No, thanks. We're good."

Yet not all felt this way. Jesus laid his hands on a few sick people and they were healed. Which makes you wonder how things were after Jesus left.

"Did you see Larry got his leprosy taken away? He no longer sleeps outside the wall. He got his old job back at the mill, he's courting the rabbi's daughter and there's talk of marriage."

"Hey, good for Larry, but that's not for me. I've got a good home out here in the Lepers' Camp."

"(Jesus) marveled because of their unbelief." **Mark 6:6 (NKJV)**

Grace is a license to sin



GRACE IS A LICENSE TO SING

It’s not hard to see why Zacchaeus had no friends. He was a money-grubbing bureaucrat who worked for the hated Romans. The Jews had no doubt that he was stealing from them to line his own pockets. Then one day, Jesus, the friend of sinners and money-grubbing bureaucrats, invited himself over for a meal.

After meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus became a more dangerous thief than ever. “I will take half of the possessions of the poor,” he boasted, “and I will cheat everybody four times as much.”

Actually, that’s not what happened. That’s not how grace works. But that’s how some *think* grace works. They say, “If grace covers my sin, why can’t I go on sinning? Why can’t I sin more?”

When you encounter the grace that Jesus gives, continuing in sin makes no sense at all. It’s preferring the pig pen to the banqueting table. It’s choosing the prison cell over the palace.

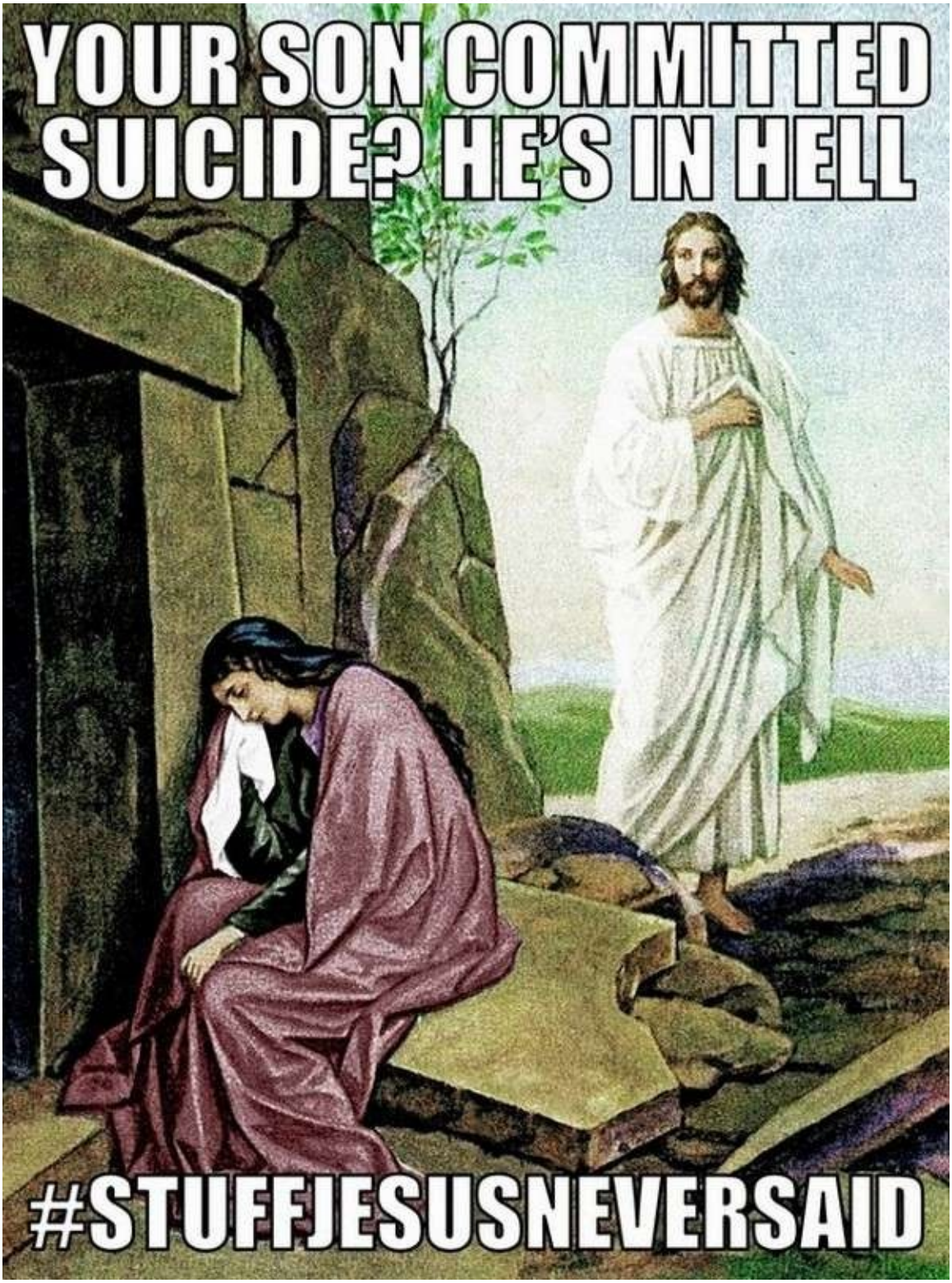
After he met Jesus, Zacchaeus was radically changed. He stopping stealing and made amends for the damage he had done. Having received the friendship of Christ, Zacchaeus sought to give friendship to others.

The old tunes of loneliness were replaced by new songs of acceptance and love.

That’s what grace does. Grace turns enemies into friends, thieves into givers, and haters into lovers. Grace empowers us to live well and sin no more.

Grace is not a license to sin but a license to sing.

“For the grace of God teaches us how to live good lives.” **Titus 2:11–12 (paraphrase)**


YOUR SON COMMITTED SUICIDE? HE'S IN HELL
#STUFFJESUSNEVERSAID

JESUS IS THE LAST WORD

Suicide raises hard questions for which there are trite and wretched answers.

“Where is your son? He’s in hell for the sin of murder. Where is your daughter? She’s eternally lost because she died without repenting.”

Such comfortless answers are a million miles from the heart of a comforting king. Look at how Jesus spoke to two grieving sisters: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.”

That’s a promise lacking in conditions. “He who believes will live.”

What if the believer dies from pneumonia? Irrelevant.

What if they are murdered? Immaterial.

What if they die at their own hand? Ditto.

The way in which you shrug off your mortal coil has no bearing on Christ’s promise of resurrection life. Whether you die from an overdose or go down with the Titanic, “He who believes in me will live.”

Why do some take their own lives? The reasons can seem incomprehensible to loved ones left behind. But while some may damn the departed or frown at those who failed to pick up the signals, Christ does not. There is no condemnation in Christ, in life or death. There is only love that leads to hope.

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life … will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” **Romans 8:38–39**

You're not good enough



GOD IS GOOD TO YOU

When our prayers seem to go unanswered, we might think, "There's something wrong with me." When life knocks us down, we might say, "I'm not good enough for God to bless me."

It's not true. There is nothing that would cause God to withhold his love from you. When did Jesus ever refuse to help someone who asked him?

Under the old law that Israel lived by, there were standards that had to be kept. You had to be well-behaved and untainted to enjoy the blessings of God. If you were a sinner, a leper, a woman, or a foreigner, you had little chance.

Then Jesus came and made a beeline for sinners, lepers, women, and foreigners.

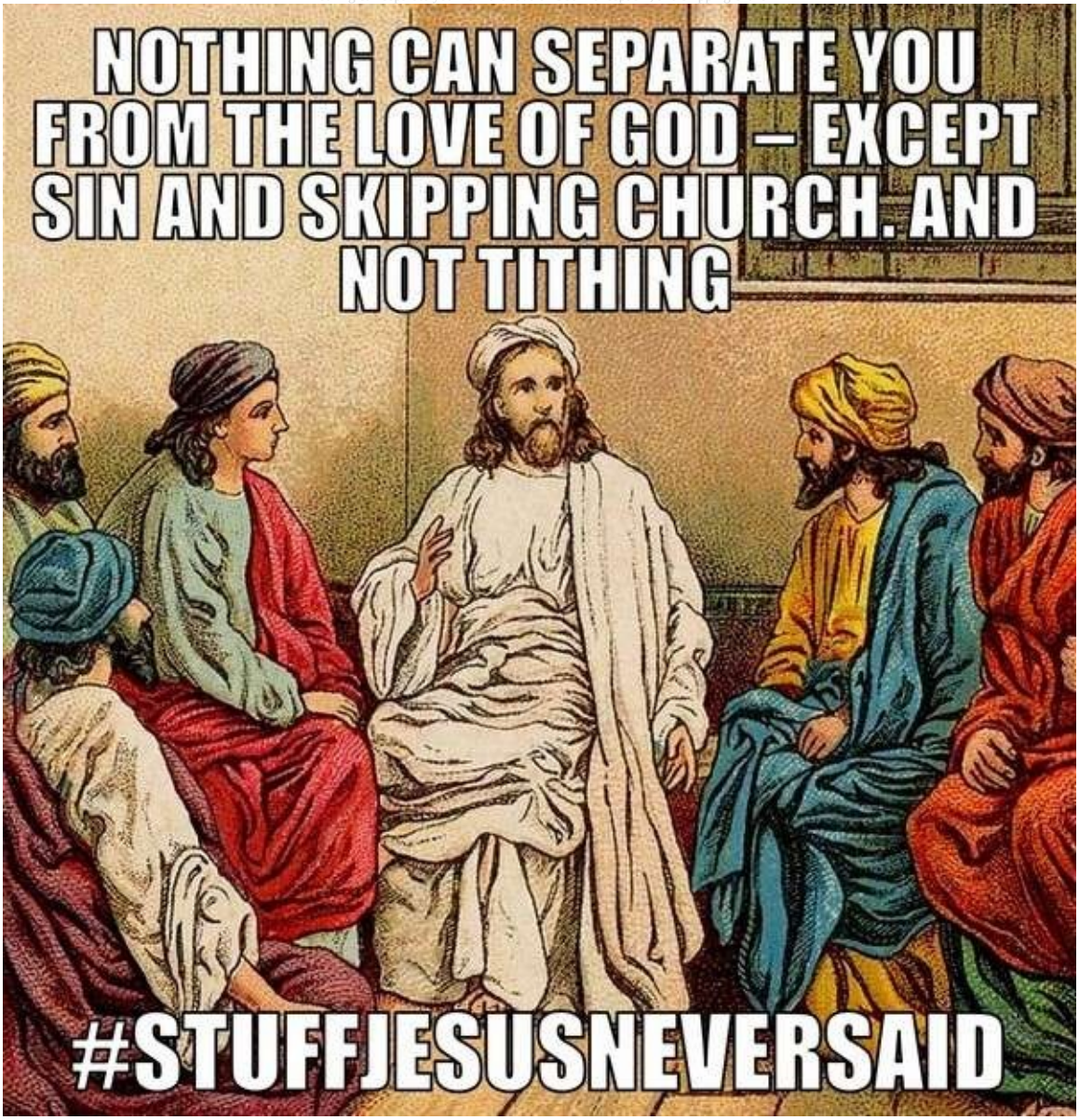
The old law condemns you as not good enough, but the grace of God revealed in Jesus says, “I love you and I’m here to help.”

God doesn’t help you because you are good but because *he* is good. Just look at some of the people he helped in the Bible. There was David (a murderer), Gideon (a coward), Jacob (a conman), Rahab (a prostitute), and Saul (a hater).

Jesus is the friend of sinners, which means he’s the friend of the not good enough. He died for sinners, which means he died for the not good enough. He did all this that we might receive his goodness and see ourselves as our heavenly Father sees us; as more than good enough, indeed dearly beloved and pleasing to God.

“You are altogether beautiful … there is no flaw in you.” **Song of Solomon 4:7**

Nothing can separate you from the love of God—except sin, and skipping church



LOVE NEVER DIES

When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan, God the Father spoke from heaven. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Jesus had not yet begun his ministry. He had not healed any sick people, nor trained any disciples. Yet God said, “I love him and am well pleased with him.”

God loves us for who we are and without regard for our résumé. His love is not

improved by the good things we do, nor is it diminished by the bad.

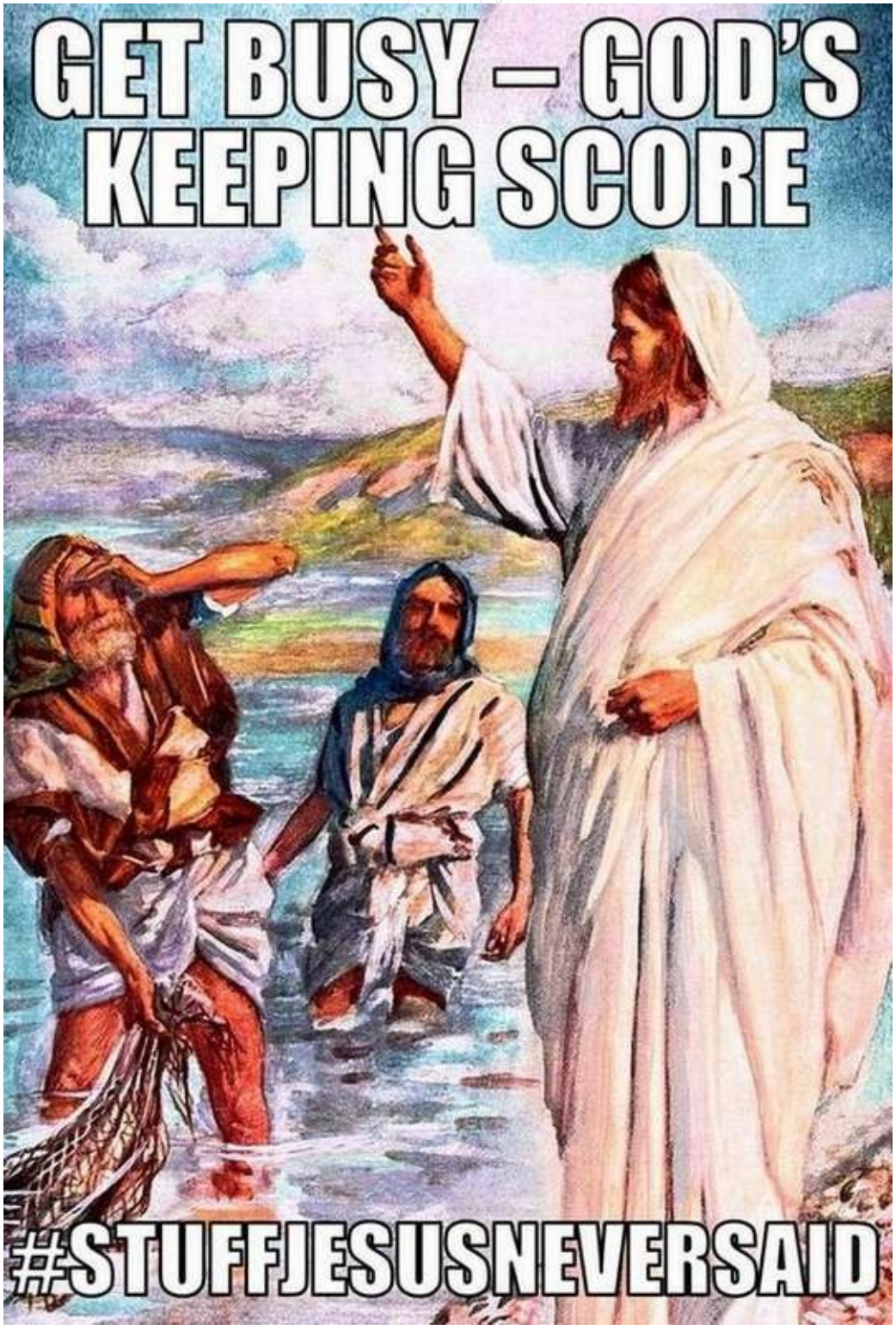
Perhaps you've heard that sinning will cause God to stop loving you. It can't happen. Your sin has more chance of extinguishing the sun than dimming your Father's love for you.

In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus reveals a heavenly Father who loves us no matter what. In the story, the errant son wished his father dead, squandered his inheritance, and ruined his life. Yet the love of the father shone constantly from start to finish. The boy's sin did not diminish it one iota.

Jesus said, "As the Father loved me, I have loved you; abide in my love." The question we must ask is not, "Will God stop loving me?" but, "Will I abide in his love?"

To abide is to rest. It's remembering that the Father loves Jesus unconditionally, and that Jesus loves us the same way. It's living from the peace that nothing we do can make him love us any more or any less. Nothing at all.

"Love never gives up … Love never dies." **1 Corinthians 13:4,8 (MSG)**



LIFE IS A REST, NOT A TEST

Jesus once told a story about a lazy servant who was beaten by his master. “The servant who knows the master’s will and does not do what the master wants will be beaten with many blows.” When he finished, all the disciples jumped up and got busy.

Actually that last bit didn’t happen, but many act as though God is a harsh taskmaster who beats his servants. “Just look at the beating Jesus gave to Mary when she didn’t help her sister in the kitchen.”

Actually, that didn’t happen either. What did happen was Martha served the Lord while Mary received from the Lord, and Jesus commended Mary for making the better choice. Jesus came to serve, not be served.

In this world success is all about keeping score. How much have you done? What have you accomplished? Did you pass the test? But when it comes to love there is no scorebook. You have nothing to prove because Christ took the test on your behalf and passed with flying colors.

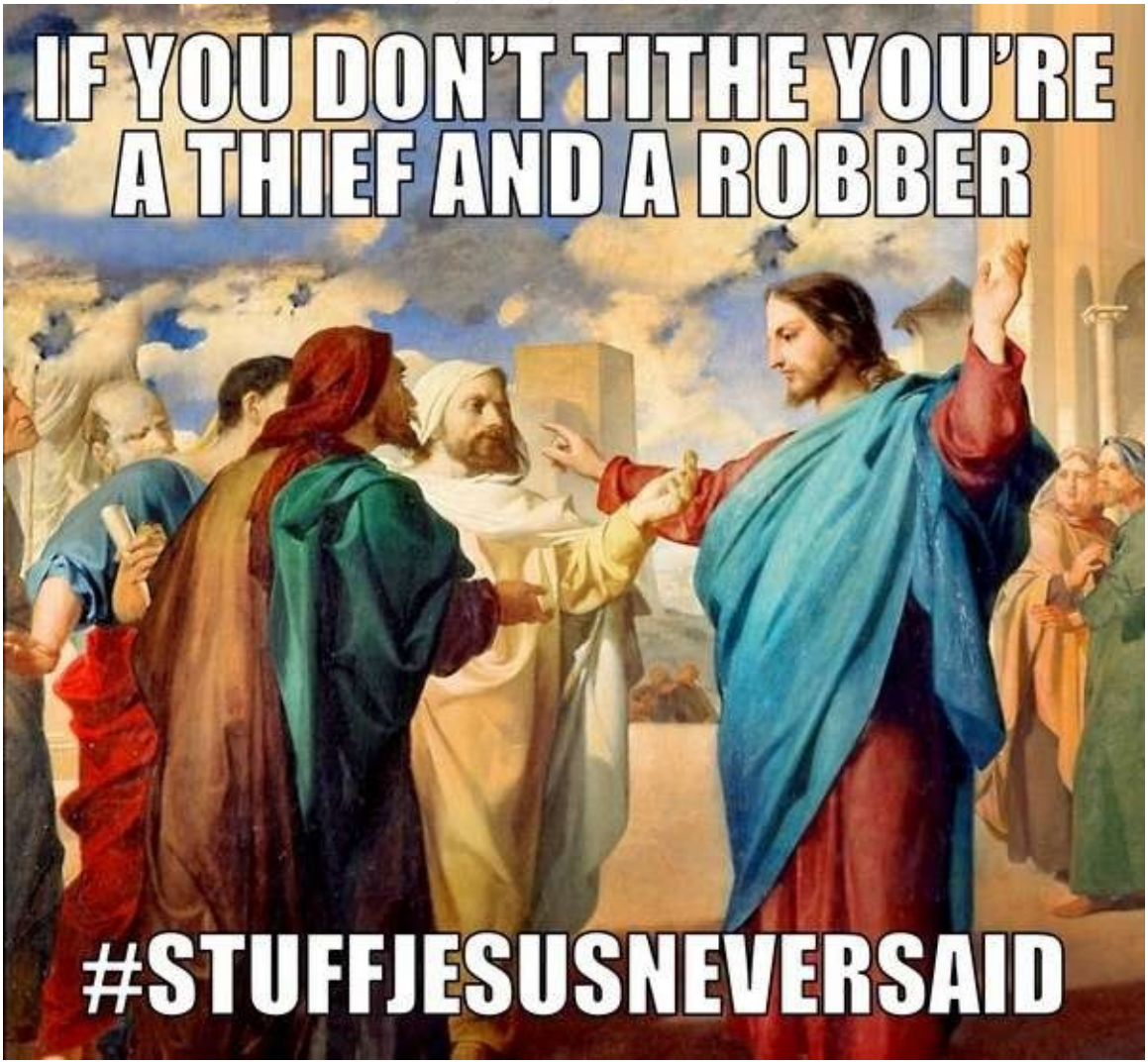
“But won’t God beat us if we’re idle?” No, God is not a child-abuser. Your heavenly Father is not grading you on how hard you work.

“But Jesus said, ‘From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded.’ That sounds like he expects payback.”

What is the much that is demanded? It is not your good behavior or your results, for these are nothing compared to what has been given. What God demands, God supplies. The much that will be demanded is the much that has been given, and that is Jesus himself. Nothing less than him will do.

“He gave us his Son—will he not also freely give us all things?” **Romans 8:32 (GNB)**

If you don't tithe you're a thief and a robber



JESUS IS YOUR TITHE

Jesus poked the hornets' nest when he said, "Watch out for those law-lovers who strut about in long robes, pray long prayers, and take the best seats at banquets." It was a provocative statement because Jesus was standing in the temple courts when he said it. He was surrounded by long-robed men.

"These men devour widows' houses," added Jesus. No doubt some of the long-robed men were upset to hear this. Perhaps they got defensive. "I never devoured a widow's house."

“Follow me to the treasury,” said Jesus. There he and his followers sat down to watch people bringing their offerings. Right on cue, as if it had been pre-ordained, a poor widow dropped in two copper coins.

“Those two coins might not look like much,” said Jesus, “but that was her grocery money. She needed that to live, yet she gave it away. Now she has nothing left.”

Jesus was not praising the widow’s generosity as much as rebuking the rich who steal from the poor. The same practice continues today whenever religious threats are made. “If you don’t tithe you’re robbing God. If you don’t tithe you’ll be cursed. If you don’t tithe you’re going to hell.”

How does religion devour the poor? By threatening them in the name of God, so that in terror they give everything they have, right down to their last penny.

The law was the shadow, but Jesus is the reality.

Just as God doesn’t expect you to slaughter sheep at the altar, nor does he expect you to tithe your crops. Jesus is the Lamb of God, your sacrificial offering and tithe.

“These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.” **Colossians 2:17**

This city's so full of sin I gotta send an earthquake



THE REMEDY FOR SIN

What is God's solution for sin? Is it earthquakes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters? A city is wiped out in a hurricane and someone says, "God was judging them for their sin." A town is flattened by an earthquake and apparently, "This was an act of divine punishment."

Except it wasn't.

It's true, we did have a sin problem, but God dealt with our problem 2000 years ago. The cross—not natural disasters—is God's once-for-all-time remedy for sin.

In the Bible a tower collapsed killing eighteen people. "Do you think that was

God's judgment?" asked Jesus. "Do you think he knocked down that tower because of their sin? Do you think they were worse sinners than others living in Jerusalem? No. That's not what God does."

If we were punished every time we sinned, we'd have very short lives.

God doesn't want us to reap the destructive consequences of sin. He wants us to live. So he sends Jesus and the mountain of our sin falls on him instead of us. Then Jesus gets up from the grave to show us that he is greater than the mountain and that the mountain is no longer the problem.

When Jesus rose from the dead it was as though God was shouting, "My love for you is greater than your sin. Believe it!"

Love, not earthquakes, is the cure for sin.

"'The mountains and hills may crumble, but my love for you will never end; I will keep forever my promise of peace.' So says the Lord who loves you."
Isaiah 54:10 (GNB)



JESUS IS THE END OF RELIGION

Jesus was no fan of religion, and religion was no fan of Jesus. The religious leaders saw Jesus as a tool of Satan, while Jesus called them snakes and sons of hell.

The institution we know as religion—that pseudo-spiritual system of practices and prohibitions—is nothing like the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus gives grace, but religion throws stones.

Jesus points to God and his goodness, but religion points to you and your badness.

Jesus is the truth, but religion is a lie.

Jesus gives life, but religion dispenses death.

The outcome of religion is your enslavement, but Jesus came to set you free.

Jesus didn’t come to swap new rules for old. He came to end that clawing, grasping system of self-advancement. He came to give you what religion never could: divine favor, lasting peace, genuine joy.

Jesus didn’t suffer and die to establish a new religion. Jesus is the end of religion.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life.” **Matthew 11:28 (MSG)**

If you’re not careful I’ll blot out your name



GOD DOESN’T MAKE MISTAKES

Jesus lived at the crossroads of two covenants; the old and the new. The old was all about you and what you did, but the new is all about Jesus and what he's done.

Under the old you were blessed if you were good and punished if you were bad, but in the new you are blessed on account of Jesus. It's a completely new way to live.

The old was marked by terrifying threats: "Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of my Book." But the new is marked by wonderful promises: "He who overcomes will be clothed in white, and I will never blot out his name from the Book of Life."

These words are Christ's guarantee of salvation. His promises are rocks you can stand on.

"But what if I don't overcome? What if I fall at the last hurdle?"

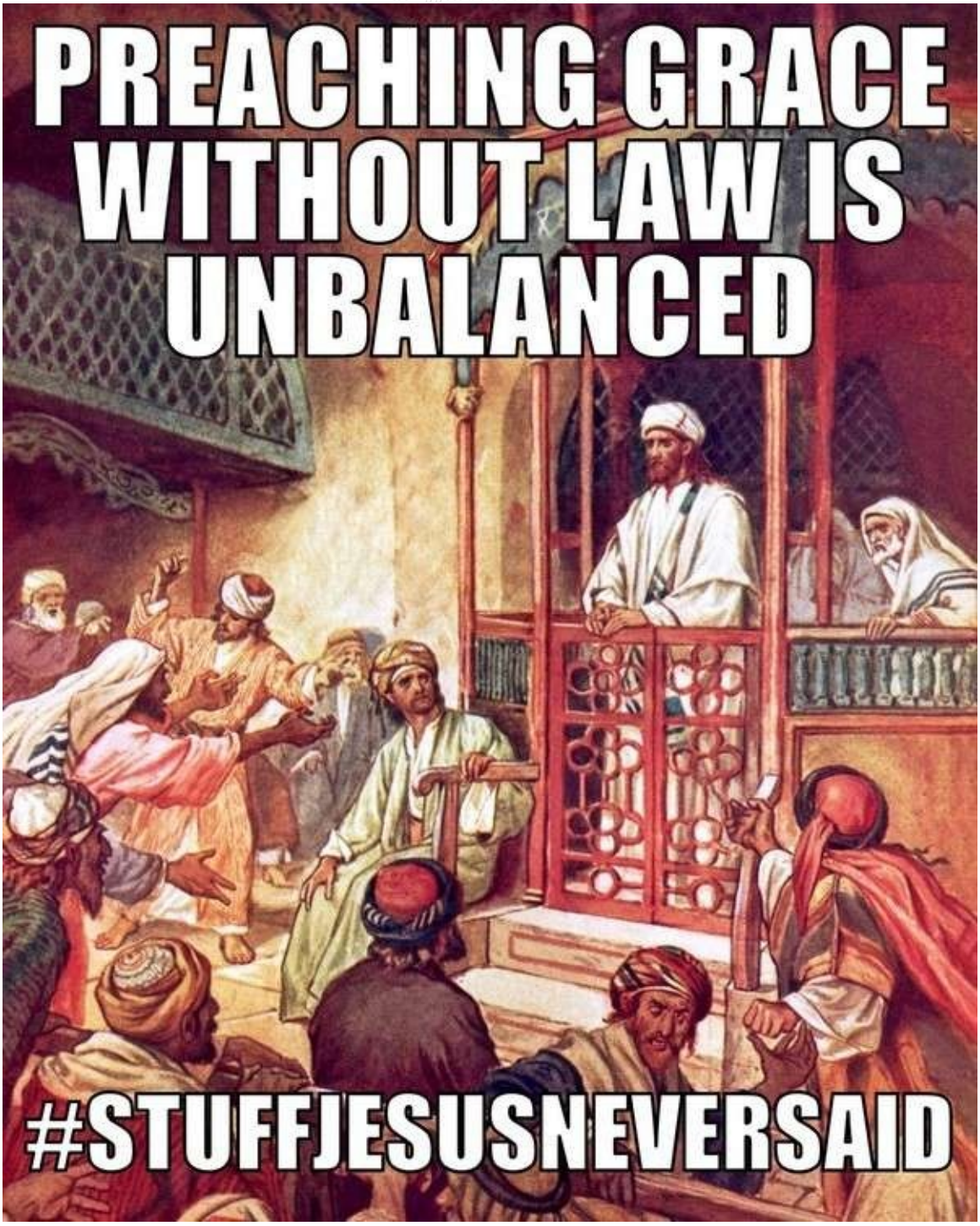
Remember, it's not about you, but Jesus who said, "I have overcome the world."

The devil couldn't tempt him, the religious couldn't silence him, Pilate couldn't fault him, death couldn't keep him, and the grave couldn't hold him. You have a great need for overcoming; you have a great Overcomer for your need.

God does not make mistakes. When your name goes in his Book, it stays in there forever.

"Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" **1 John 5:5 (NKJV)**

Preaching grace without law is unbalanced



YOU CAN TRY OR YOU CAN TRUST

You can relate to God through grace or law. Watchman Nee, the Chinese teacher

and author, distinguished the two like this: “Grace means that God does something for me; law means that I do something for God.”

This difference is captured in the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector. Both men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee boasted of all he was doing for the Lord, but the tax collector stood at a distance, beat his chest and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

The first man took pride in his lawful performance, but Jesus was not impressed. “Everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled.” The second man had nothing to boast about, yet Jesus said he went home right with God. “Those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

That’s the difference between law and grace. The law silences the proud, while grace elevates the humble. The law condemns the best of us, but grace justifies the worst of us.

Law and grace cannot be mixed. It’s one or the other. The law is a hard taskmaster, but Jesus said, “My burden is easy.” To live by the rules is to bear a heavy yoke, but Jesus said, “My yoke is light.”

There is no middle ground, no grace plus law. You can try to keep the law or you can trust in Christ who fulfilled the law on your behalf.

To paraphrase Watchman Nee, you can try or you can trust, and the difference between the two is heaven and hell.

“Walk with me and … learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you.” **Matthew 11:29 (MSG)**



GIVING IN SECRET

“Before I begin the Sermon on the Mount,” said Jesus never, “I want to publicly acknowledge some important donors. Then I’ll name and shame those of you who haven’t given a bean.”

Nor did Jesus ever say, “I’m going to show you some pictures of starving children, then Mary will sing a sad song to make you feel guilty about keeping your money. Thank you for your generosity.”

Jesus never used shame or told sob stories to pressure people into giving. Nor did Jesus ever say to the disciples, “When building your churches, large tithers are key. Make sure you land those whales.”

Jesus never said anything like that.

But he did say something like this: “When you give to the needy, don’t flash your wallet around like the hypocrites do. Instead, give in secret. Don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is giving. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

The practice of acknowledging people according to how much they give promotes pride, “Look at how much you gave!” and shame, “You’ve not given enough.” Temples and tabernacles have been built with both, but God’s kingdom is funded by neither.

“Make up your own mind what you will give. That will protect you against sob stories and arm-twisting.” **2 Corinthians 9:7 (MSG)**

God took your job because you were enjoying it too much



GOD DOESN'T TAKE AWAY HIS GOOD GIFTS

Joy and happiness followed Jesus wherever he went. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus listed eight ways to be blessed or happy. He told stories about the joy of finding lost things and buried treasures. He brought joy to cripples, the blind, and the parents of dead children. And when he ascended into heaven, his

disciples were filled with great joy.

Yet apparently God is a killjoy who wants you to serve him in misery and sadness.

Such is the picture we get from joyless religion. “You need to be serious, work hard, and suck lemons.” In other words, if you’re enjoying life, you must be doing something wrong.

How different is the God of the Bible! The Psalmist said of the Lord, “At your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” James the Apostle wrote, “Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights.”

As light comes from the sun, good things come from God. He is the Source of all that is good and lovely.

“God does not change like shifting shadows,” added James. In other words, God doesn’t change his mind and take back his good gifts.

Good health, a good marriage, good friends, good food, and a good job—these are good gifts that point to a good God who delights to bless us and who never takes back what he gives.

“I will sing the Lord’s praise, for he has been good to me.” **Psalm 13:6**

God forgives but never forgets



GOD IS NOT A FAULT FINDER

A traveler was lost in an unfamiliar city. As night fell and curtains were drawn, he began to lose all hope of finding his way. Then an officer of the law passed by.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the traveler, “I’m lost.”

“Indeed you are,” said the law-man, “for you are in a dangerous neighborhood. You have foolishly taken a wrong turn. Retrace your steps and take a better one.”

Then turning on his heels, the constable strode off into the night leaving the traveler as lost as ever.

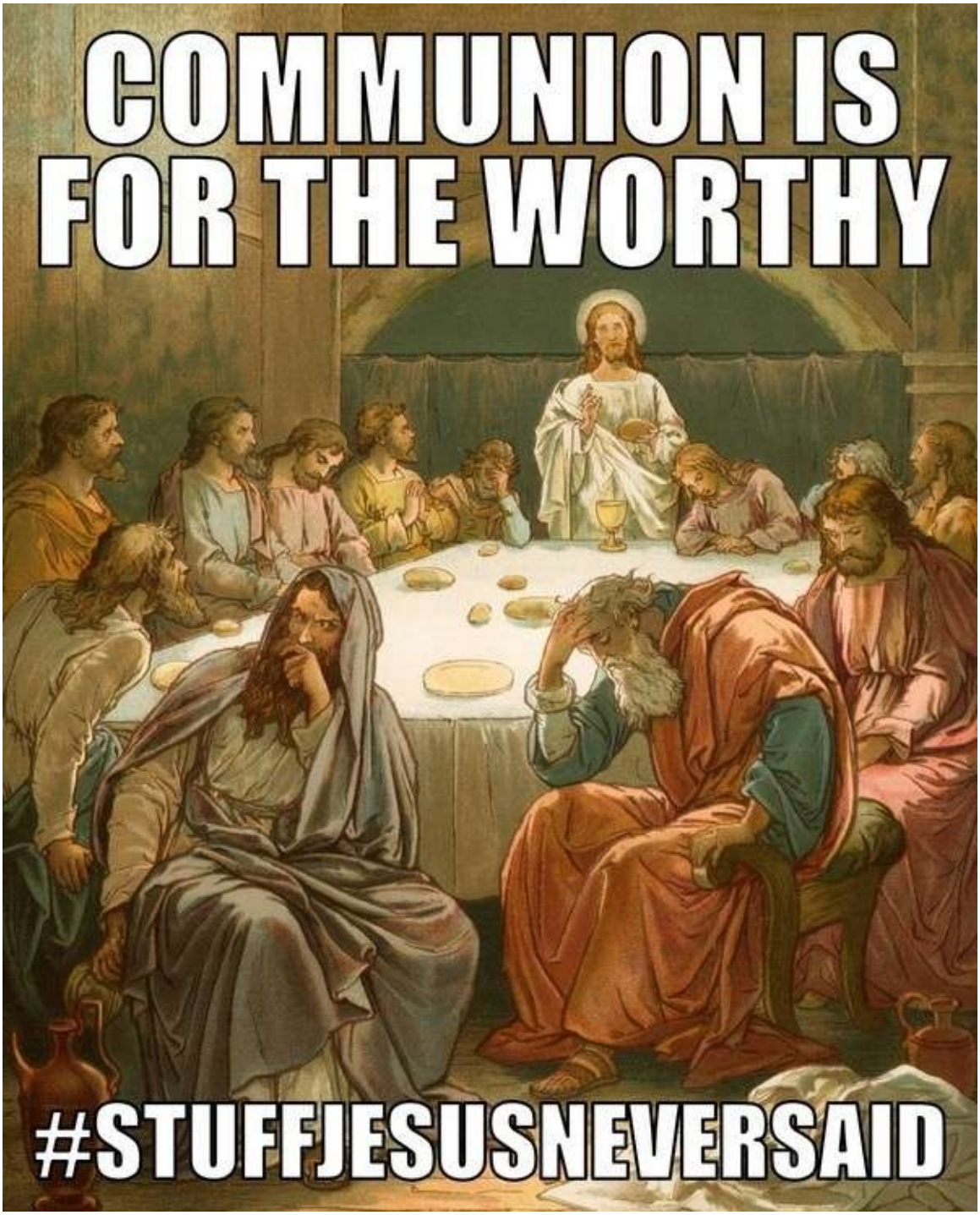
Perhaps you have heard it said that the Holy Spirit reminds us of our sins. “When you sin, he will point out your fault so that you can make amends.” In

other words, he’s the critical constable who tells you that you are lost, but does nothing to help you find your way.

But that is not how Jesus described the Holy Spirit. “The Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth.”

The Spirit of Grace doesn’t point to your faults; he points you to Jesus. He doesn’t condemn you as lost; he shows you how to be found.

“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”
Hebrews 8:12



GOOD NEWS IN A CUP

A new restaurant opened for business. On the day of the opening the owner

stood in the doorway greeting arrivals like long-lost friends. “Welcome, I’m so glad you came. Make yourself at home. I hope you like my restaurant.”

Touched by the owner’s warmth, visitors sat down in anticipation of a good meal. From the kitchen came the mouth-watering smells of a heavenly feast. But when it came time to order food, the manager refused to serve them. “I’m sorry, but this food is for my family, not you. However, you are welcome to watch us eat.”

The hungry visitors were confused and bewildered by the owner’s behavior. Some laughed, some posted angry reviews, but none of them ever went back to the restaurant.

Who can partake of communion? Jesus specified no limits, but we do whenever we say things like: “If you’re not a church member, or if you’ve not been baptized, or if you’ve sinned, please don’t partake of the Lord’s table.” Like confused restauranteurs, we let people in, but we don’t let them eat.

Jesus ate with anyone, anywhere, anytime, but we have higher standards. Tax collectors? Forget about it. Prostitutes? Not a chance.

It seems the Lord was more generous with his table than we are. At the Last Supper Jesus served communion to men who, hours later, tried to kill other men with swords. Jesus even served communion to a man who was conspiring to kill him, a man Jesus had called a devil. It’s as if Jesus would serve communion to anyone.

Communion is good news in a cup. Who is communion for? It’s for everyone and anyone who needs to hear the good news.

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” **Luke 22:20**

Have some sickness, it'll teach you character



JESUS OUR TEACHER

In the Bible people referred to Jesus as a teacher sent from God. Jesus is both the Great Physician and the Great Teacher. Yet apparently there are some things the Great Teacher can't teach.

Imagine the following conversation:

God: "I want Joe to learn humility. Jesus, can you teach humility?"

Jesus: "Humility, that's a toughie. Never been my strong suit, I'm afraid."

God: "No problem. Cancer's a good teacher. I'll give Joe pancreatic cancer, that'll teach him. Then one day he'll thank me for making him humble."

It’s a ludicrous conversation, but it’s no more ludicrous than attributing bad things to a good God.

Jesus spent three years teaching his disciples and not once did he say, “Peter, you hothead, have some paralysis, it’ll teach you patience. James and John, you Sons of Thunder, you need to calm down, receive some tuberculosis. Thomas, you need more faith, have some scurvy.”

It’s ridiculous to think that God gives us sickness. God cannot give what he does not have.

“Great multitudes followed him, and he healed them all.” **Matthew 12:15 (NKJV)**

God wants you poor so you can learn humility



“I GIVE YOU A KINGDOM”

Poverty is not a blessing. There is nothing good or blessed about being unable to feed, clothe, or house your family. So why would God want us poor? He doesn’t. It’s a myth. No father wants his kids to be poor and sick.

So why did Jesus say, “Blessed are the poor”? The poor are not blessed because they are poor. They’re blessed because God gives them his kingdom.

And who are the poor? From God’s perspective we are all poor and needy. Every single one of us needs the life that Christ offers.

God doesn’t want you poor; he wants you blessed.

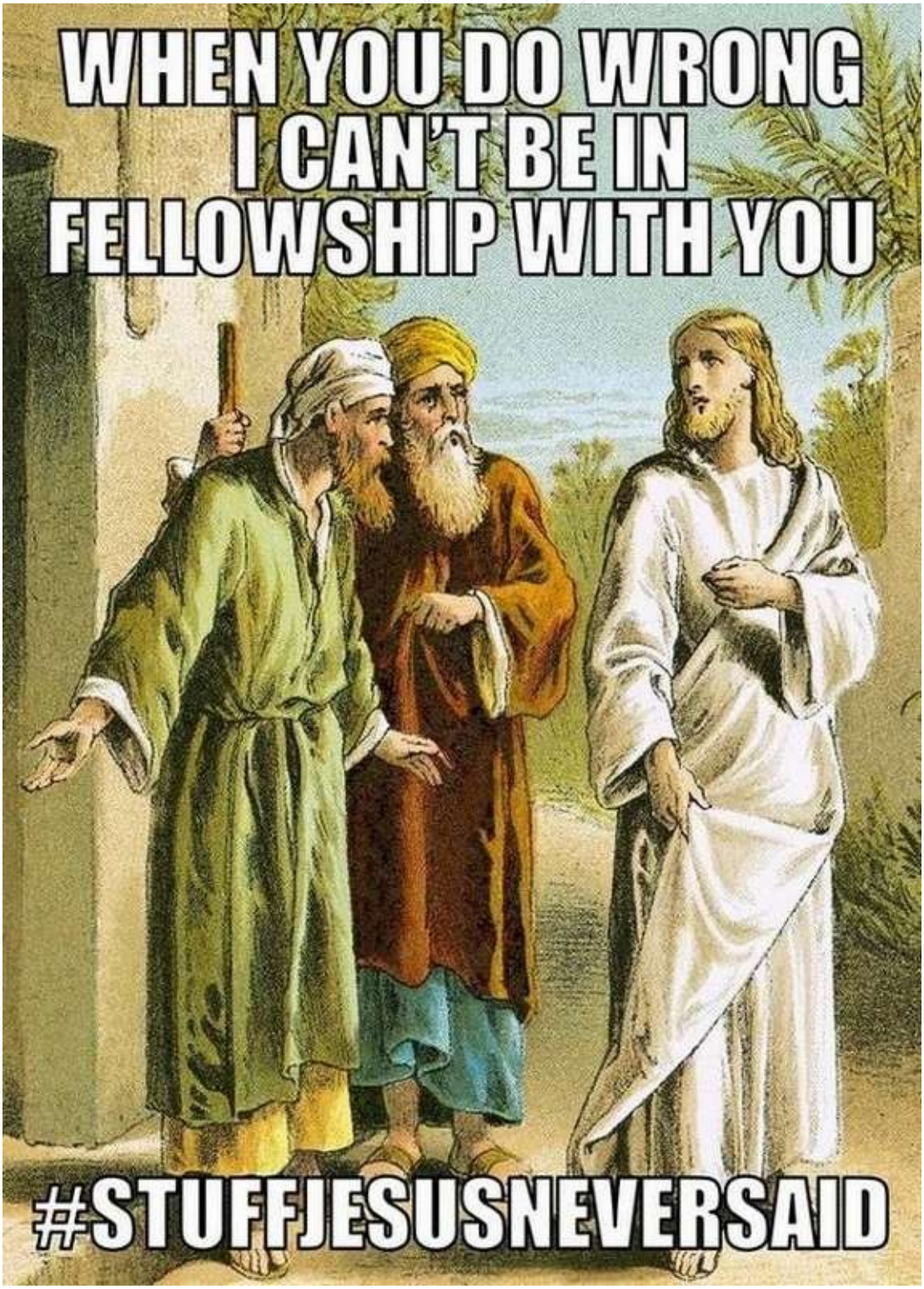
Think of the poor prodigal being clothed by his father. That's what God does to us. He puts shoes on our feet, his ring on our finger, and invites us to join the never-ending banquet of his delight.

"I confer on you a kingdom," said Jesus to the disciples. The kingdom of God is not populated by poor princes. We are co-heirs with Christ who is the heir of all things.

A poverty mentality is a natural consequence of living in a world of never enough, but the grace Jesus revealed points to a God of more than enough. In this world there is lack, but there's no poverty in heaven. If poverty is not God's will there, it is not his will here.

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich." **2 Corinthians 8:9 (NKJV)**

When you do wrong I can't be in fellowship with you



JESUS WILL NEVER GIVE UP ON YOU

Does God get offended when we sin? Does he withdraw from us until we admit our fault? Did Jesus withdraw from his disciples after they abandoned him in the garden?

Jesus considers his brothers and sisters as members of his body. He can no more abandon us than he can abandon his own arm. When we sin, Jesus does not cut us off. When we are unfaithful, he remains faithful. His love never quits.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul asked, “Shall I take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?” That such a thing is even possible testifies to the enduring strength of Christ’s love for you. It’s as if Christ were saying, “I hope you don’t sin, but if you do, I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

In a culture that worships rules, people are kept in line with fear. “Sin and God will cut you off.” But those who have met Jesus are motivated by a love that says, “Even if you sin I will never cut you off.” This is what changes us; not the weak restraint of rules, but the compelling power of his love.

Humanity was born to be free. Bind us with rules and we will chafe and run. But we gladly yield to unconditional love. It’s what we were made for.

On that resurrection night when the disciples saw the Lord, they did not find him hurt and offended. They didn’t hear him say, “Where were you turkeys?” Instead, they found a love that had conquered all and they were changed. The same men who ran in fear became globe-trotting apostles testifying to the love of Christ, a love that never gives up.

“If we give up on him, he does not give up—for there’s no way he can be false to himself.” **2 Timothy 2:13 (MSG)**

You need waaaaay more faith



THE TREMBLING HAND OF FAITH

“To move your mountain-sized problem,” said Jesus, “A tiny grain of faith is sufficient.” The disciples wondered, “How is this possible? Surely big jobs require big faith.”

It’s not the size of your faith that matters, but the size of your God. The disciples didn’t need more faith. They needed to see the big God that Jesus reveals. “The things which are impossible with men are possible with God.”

Charles Spurgeon once said, “By faith all things become possible to us; yet the power is not in the faith, but in that God upon whom the faith relies.”

God’s powerful grace is experienced through faith.

If grace is the power station, then faith is the slender wire through which the current flows.

If grace is the tractor, then faith is the chain by which we are connected to that propelling power.

If grace is the river, then faith is the aqueduct by which we receive that flood of mercy.

“The weakness of your faith will not destroy you,” said Spurgeon. “(Even) a trembling hand may receive a golden gift.”

“If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move.” **Matthew 17:20**



BY HIS STRIPES YOU ARE HEALED

"You want God to heal you? Then show him you mean business by fasting for days and praying for months."

Perhaps you think you need to earn your healing. If you don't do your part, God can't do his part.

Or perhaps you've wondered, "Why wasn't Sam healed? Maybe he didn't pray hard enough. He wasn't desperate enough. He should've fasted."

Yet Jesus never spoke like this.

Jesus healed people who had prayed for years and people who had never prayed at all. He healed Jews and Gentiles, saints and sinners. He healed the high-born and the lowly, the living and the dead.

Jesus was indiscriminate to show that it's not about us or who we are or what we do. Healing is a God thing, from start to finish.

When you pray, don't focus on what you've done (I've fasted!) or not done (I haven't fasted!). Think about Jesus and what he's done.

"He was wounded for our transgressions … and by his stripes we are healed."
Isaiah 53:5 (NKJV)

Leave your current husband and reconcile with your first



LOVE THAT HEALS

Life is messy. Try and reduce life to a set of neat rules and you'll end up tangled in knots. You'll be susceptible to nonsensical prescriptions such as this: "You're living in sin. Leave your current husband, who loves you, and return to your first, who is abusive and violent." It's a ludicrous suggestion, but one that divorced churchgoers sometimes hear.

This crazy cake is baked from three stock ingredients: First, "Divorce is a sin." So what does that say about God who divorced faithless Israel? Second, "God hates divorce." But he doesn't hate divorced people. He loves them. Third, "You broke it, you fix it." That sort of thinking led Adam to the fig leaves and a fat lot of good that did. Adam could not repair the damage of his mistake, and sometimes neither can we.

Divorce is not part of God's plan. God hates divorce because it hurts his kids, but divorce happens. Marriages sometimes break and families get torn apart. It's a tragedy that is only worsened by finger-pointing rule-worshippers.

The billy club of religious principles is no cure for brokenness.

What does Jesus say to the wife who's been dumped? "I love you, I always have and I always will." And what does Jesus say to the husband who dumped her? "I love you, I always have and I always will."

There, in the unconditional love of Christ, lies our healing. His acceptance for our rejection, and his balm for our wounds.

"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." **Psalm 147:3**

Leave the church and we'll shun you



THE GOOD SHEPHERD WILL NEVER FORSAKE YOU

The list of people who walked away from Jesus is long, but the list of people Jesus shunned has no names.

Those who quit on Jesus were not cursed or mocked from the pulpit. Jesus did not say to them, "You have walked out from my umbrella of protection," or,

“You have a spirit of witchcraft.” Jesus didn’t stop loving people who stopped loving him.

Consider the disciples. On the night Christ was betrayed, they all ran away. They were the world’s first church and every one of them left.

Yet Jesus did not get angry or rebuke them. After rising from the dead he didn’t avoid them in the street or spread malicious rumors about them. Instead, he sought out the men who deserted him and said, “Peace be with you.”

From time to time sheep may run away, but the Good Shepherd never abandons his sheep. Instead he searches for them and he rejoices when he finds them.

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them … no one will snatch them out of my hand.” **John 10:27–28**



GOD DOESN'T NEED PERMISSION TO FORGIVE YOU

Jesus went around forgiving people who neither asked for forgiveness nor deserved it. A paralyzed man was brought to him and Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven." (Who said anything about forgiveness? I thought this was going to be

a healing meeting.)

An adulteress was brought to Jesus, and he said, “There’s no condemnation here.” (No condemnation? What am I going to do with these stones?)

Roman soldiers tortured him and nailed him to a cross, and Jesus said, “Father, forgive them.” (More forgiveness?! Where’s the wrath? Where’s the fire from heaven?)

Jesus forgave people who neither asked for nor deserved it to convey a powerful truth: God does not need your permission to forgive you. And God certainly doesn’t need your confession.

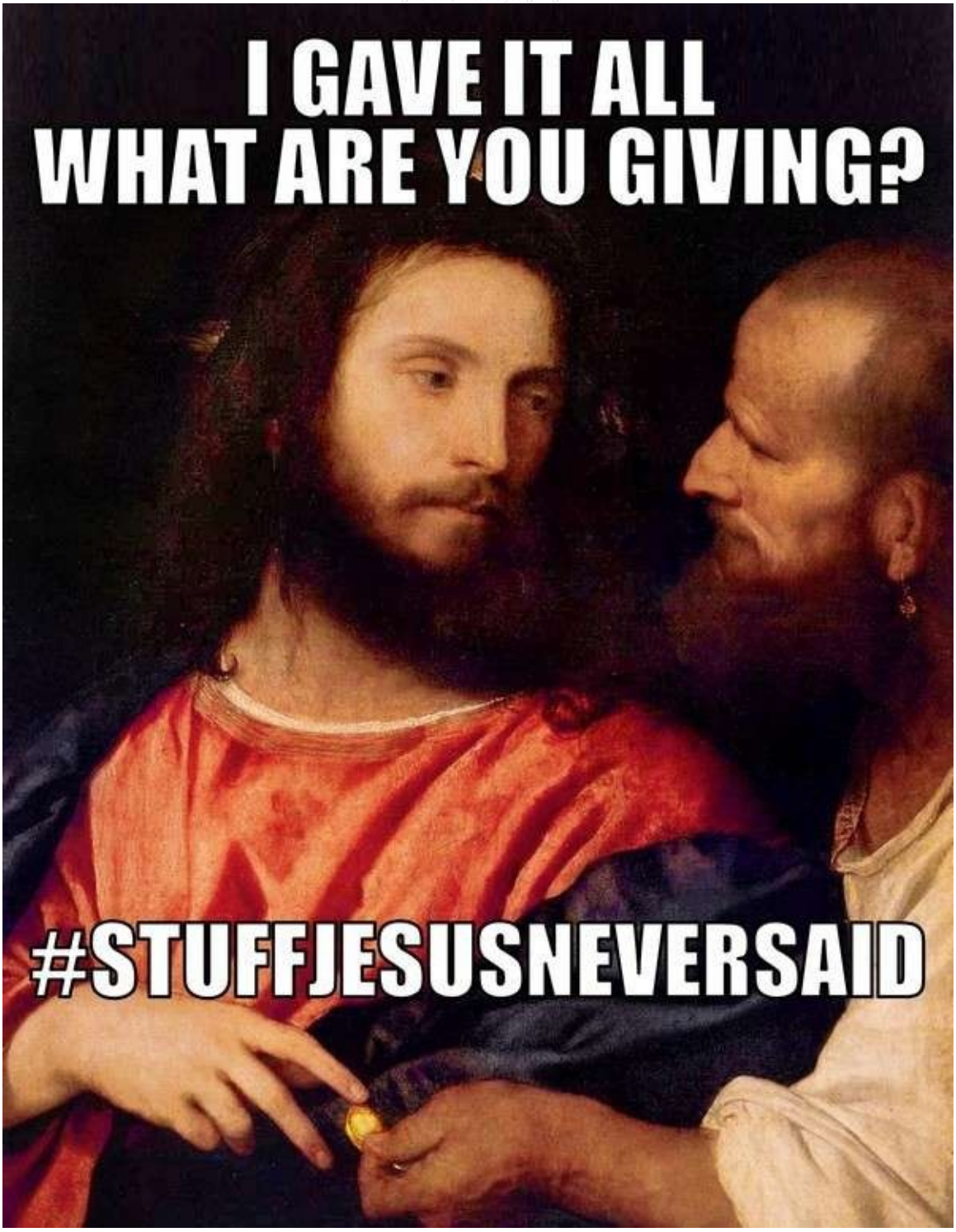
Perhaps you think you must review your sins and keep short accounts before God will forgive you. It’s not true. Did the paralyzed man confess? Did the soldiers?

Confession is not the price you pay for a gift that cannot be bought. But confession may help you receive the gift that has been given.

Genuine confession has less to do with me and my badness, and more to with Christ and his goodness. It’s acknowledging my dependence on his grace. It’s agreeing with God that even though I messed up, his grace is greater than my sin, and his best is better than my worst.

True confession is saying, “Thank you, Jesus.”

“Friend, your sins are forgiven.” **Luke 5:20**



THE JOY OF GIVING

Are you conscious of some debt to Christ? Do you feel obliged to give? Do you give until it hurts?

To be obliged is to be bound to do something, so giving because you feel obligated is a form of bondage. Giving out of obligation is not giving; it's paying down a debt.

The notion that we have a debt to Christ, or that we could even begin to pay it insults the Spirit of grace. Christ died to set you free, not bind you with a debt you could never repay.

So why give? For what reason should we give anything?

Jesus gave his life for the joy set before him, meaning he did it for his family—his Father and all his brothers and sisters. Jesus didn't give because he was obliged to or because he had a debt to humanity. He did it because he loves you, and we give for the same reason—out of love for others.

"Make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon," said Jesus, "so that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home." In other words, spend your money on people so that when you die you'll have eternal friends.

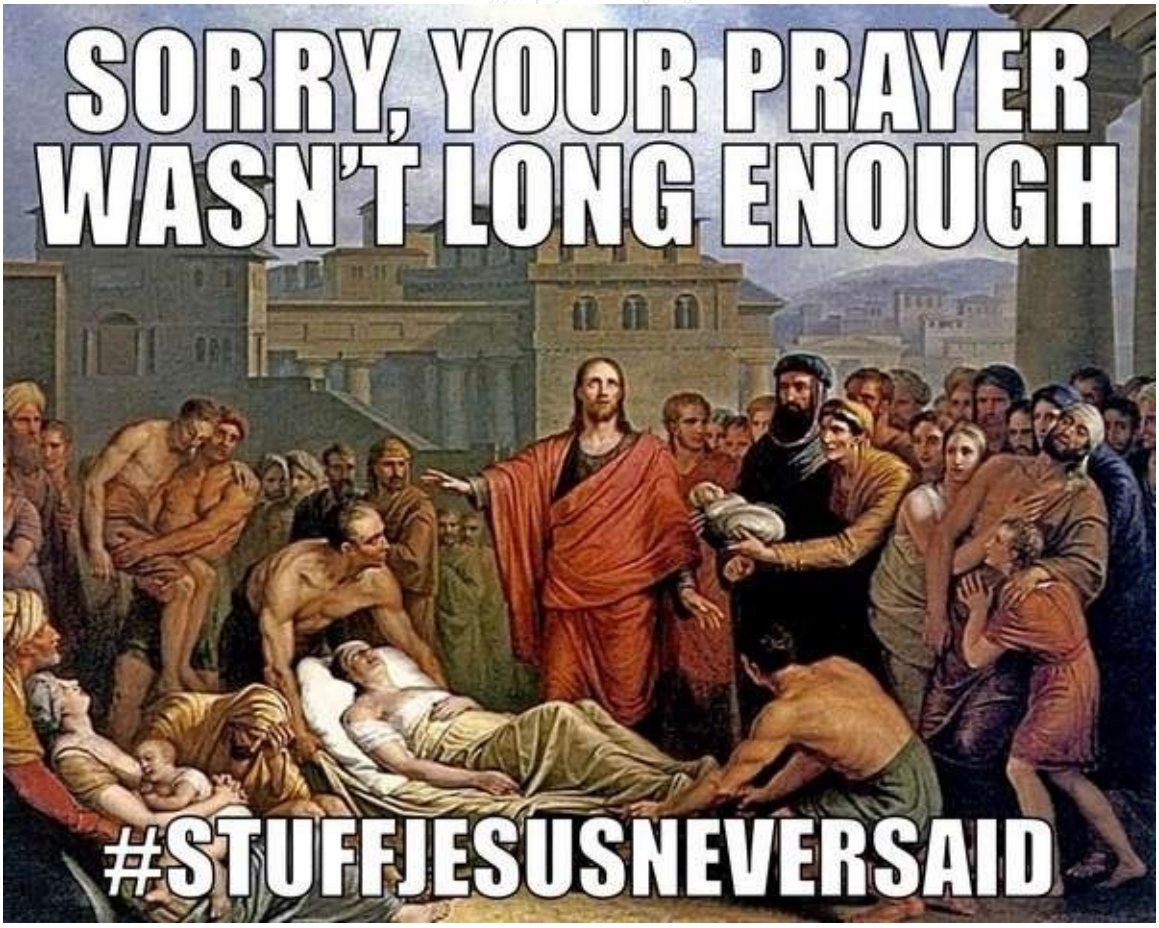
How do we do that?

"Throw parties for the poor and weak," said Jesus. "Invite people who can't pay you back. Give to the needy and you will have treasure in heaven that never wears out and no thief can steal."

Jesus reveals that the joy in giving is experienced in the lives we touch, and the fruit of our giving can be enjoyed for eternity.

"God loves it when the giver delights in the giving." **2 Corinthians 9:7 (MSG)**

Sorry, your prayer wasn't long enough



YOUR FATHER HEARS YOU

Have you ever noticed the many short prayers recorded in the Gospels?

The thief on the cross prayed, "Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." The tax collector in the temple prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner." And drowning Peter prayed one of the shortest prayers of all, "Lord, save me."

When faced with a great need, the temptation is to pray hard, as though God needs to be convinced of our need. But Jesus said, "Your Father knows what you need before you ask him."

"But to show God I'm serious, I need to pray for hours and hours." "Not so,"

said Jesus. “Don’t babble on like pagans who think they will be heard because of their many words. Instead, pray like this: ‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name’.”

We don’t stand at a distance praying to Almighty God the Judge of the Living and the Dead. We draw close to our heavenly Father who loves us and wants to be revealed as our Daddy who knows our needs.

When the sick and oppressed came to him for healing, Jesus never told them to go away and pray more. And Jesus often kept his own prayers short. He healed the sick and drove out demons, “… with a word.”

Jesus stilled the storm and raised the dead with short prayers because he trusted in a heavenly Father who hears us and longs to help us in our hour of need.

“Father, I thank you that you have heard me.” **John 11:41**

You're on your own



YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Man rejected his Maker but God did not reject us. He did not abandon humanity but sent his Son to rescue us from the prison of loneliness and despair.

With his rescue mission nearly complete, Jesus told the disciples, "I will not leave you as orphans." An orphan is a fatherless child. An orphan is alone. Jesus was saying you don't have to be alone. "My Father and I will come to you and make our home with you."

After they received the Holy Spirit, the disciples understood what Jesus had meant when he said, "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." No longer alone, they had become walking, talking temples of the Holy Spirit.

God takes lonely people and adopts them into his family. Why does he do it? Because God wants his kids back. How does it happen? Jesus woos us then ones us to himself in spiritual union. One with the Lord we become brand new, saints not sinners, children not orphans.

Companionship, friendship, intimacy—these are things we all long for, but Christ meets our need. We don't have to beg God to rend the heavens and come down. He already did. Neither do we fear that he might abandon us as orphans. He promised he wouldn't.

One with the Lord, we have strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.

"God sets the lonely in families." **Psalm 68:6**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the generous support of the following patrons: Adebare Adedigba, John Adriaans, Bank Akinmola, Ian and Norma Anderson, Randy and Julee Armstrong, Nick Atkins, Andrew Babu, Liz Bailey, Peter Barnett, Tommy Bason, Don Beeson, Joel Belcher, Lester Blair, Rene Bouwer, Matt Bovett, Tim Brasic, JAS Breedlove, Elizabeth Brown, Ricky L Cain, Brian Campbell, Dennis and Denise Capra, Gideon Caranzo, Jessica Carpenter, Shannon Carroll, Marion Carterm, Ron Clark, Luc Constantin, Rhea Cooper, Cornerstone Bible Church in Crofton, KY, Ben Dailey, Derrick Darden, James Davis, Andre de Haan, Pagasa De Mesa, Paul De Sousa, Richard F De Souza, Kyle Defoe, Klaus and Erika Degen, Frank DeNato, Steve Douglas, Makala Doulos, David Dunham, Susie Dunlap, David Edwardds, Paul Eilers, Scott and Christine Engell, Jennifer Engstrom, Van Ertel, Stefanie Esparza, Chris Esparza, Mark Flint, Jason Foo, Grant Foster, Bill Fowler, Bonnie Frimet, Alonzo Garcia, Gilbert Gatdula, Lyle Geck, Kim Geisnes, Kirsty Gerlach, Lew Gervais, Pete Godwin, Angela Golingi, Miguel, Stephanie and Estelle Gonzalez, James Goss, Larry Elegado Gracilla, Michael Gragg, Erik Grangaard, Pat Greene, Gary Greer, Debra Hamilton, Kenneth Hamner, Peter Hanson, Lisman Harapan, Adriaan Hattingh, Stephanie Hay, Rose Hayden, Amanda Henderson, Swee Heng Chee, Jax Hill, Frank Hillberg, Penny Hippey, Hannah Hoffmann, Eric and Nancy Holman, Hannu Tapani Honkapaa, Anne H Hoover, Justin Hopper, Eveline Hotz Gamonez, Bik Hou, Chad Huffman, Tony Ide, Damon Jackson, Christopher Johnson, Toshiko Johnson, Olen Jones, Mikael Jonsson, Berris-Dale Joseph, Moses S M Kawuma, Melissa Keewee, Michael Kelehan, Melissa and Adam Kensell, Jan Kiel, Jason Kim, Josh King, Yuting Kita, Josh Klaas, Steven Kotsonis, Elly “Singer” Kraai, S Kunnath, Bruce Leane, Richard Lee. Colin Leo, Michael and Julie Lipparelli, Ore Ljinigba, Deborah Long, Samuel Lowell, Norin Lumungking, Gerry Macabuhay, Leandro O Magboo, Marlon Manantan, Andy Manuel, Euan P Marshall, Robert Marshall, Terry Maupin, Deborah Maxwell, Edward McCarthy, Lloyd D McCaskill, Bill McDonald, Mark McElwee, Brian McLaughlin, Patti McPike, Joe Merchant, Kimberly Miller, James Miller, Caleb Mitre, Karen Moffett, Kundayi Bernard Mugabe, Steve Mvondo, Janelle and Terry Myers, Andrea Eva Nagy, Kindall Nelson, Ted and Georgie Nelson, Paul Noble, Michelle Nonis, David and Lynnette Oehrke,

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SOURCES

Page 26: Unchangeable love. The Columbus illustration is from D. L. Moody's book *The Way to God and How to Find It*, p.9. The Brennan Manning quote is from *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, p.162.

Page 46: The law points to Jesus. The clumsy servant analogy comes from Watchman Nee's book *The Normal Christian Life*, p.157.

Page 52: Jesus wants you to rest. The quote from Spurgeon comes from his sermon no. 531, "The Warrant of Faith" (Sept. 20, 1863).

Page 56: If it matters to you it matters to him. Andrew Wommack describes prayer as, "Kissing our Father's face" in his book *A Better Way to Pray*, p.35.

Page 70: It's his fruit we bear. The Hudson Taylor quote is found in *Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission* by Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor.

Page 96: You can try or you can trust. The Watchman Nee quotes are from his book *The Normal Christian Life*, pp.155, 183.

Page 112: The trembling hand of faith. The Spurgeon quotes are from *All of Grace*, pp.37–39.

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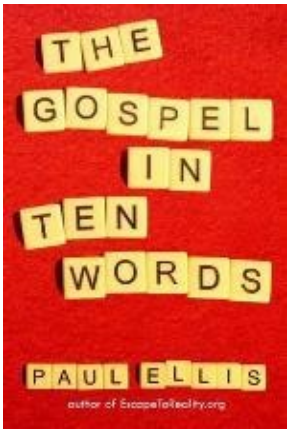
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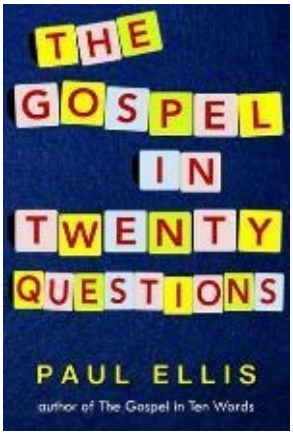


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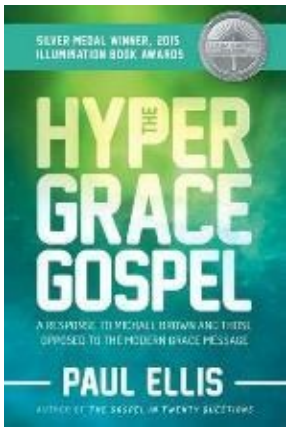


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