SOUL DETOX
Clean Living in a Contaminated World

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God doesn’t seek for golden vessels, and does not ask for silver ones, but He must have clean ones.
—Dwight L. Moody

When I was growing up, it seemed like all grown-ups smoked, all the moms continually twirling Virginia Slims between their fingers while the dads talked with a Marlboro or Camel dangling from the corner of their mouths. They all enjoyed their cigarettes, which I gathered were probably better than what most of them smoked in the ’60s. My own mom and dad, although wonderful parents in too many ways to count, fit right in with their peers and smoked at least two packs a day.

Being raised in a house filled with smoke, I was never bothered by the smell. A nonsmoking guest would have instantly identified it and
likely complained, but my family thought nothing of it. Most of us probably have a smell we associate with growing up — our mom’s pine cleaner or our dad’s Old Spice. For me the smell was cigarette smoke. I found it strangely comforting because it was what made home smell like home.

Since all my buddies’ parents also smoked, their homes had the same odor — all except for Mike’s house. Although I didn’t know why at the time, I remember loving the way Mike’s home smelled. Each time I walked in the front door, I felt like I’d just entered a Sea Breeze commercial. It’s hard to describe what “clean” smells like, but I thought Mike’s mom knew the secret formula. Not only did every room sparkle, but they smelled so fresh, lemony, and bright, as if his mom had just finished dusting with Pledge before we walked in. Looking back, I know that the fresh, cool smell wasn’t just the presence of air freshener but the absence of cigarette smoke. No one lit up at Mike’s house.

While the health risks of smoking were well known at the time, it was a few years before the American Medical Association came out with its findings on the dangers of secondhand smoke, especially for children. Their conclusions led to a series of public service announcements that showed toddlers lighting up and puffing away and other similarly shocking scenes. No one’s parents were trying to poison their family and cause health problems. Nonetheless, they unknowingly put all the people they loved — including themselves — at risk.

*Where There’s Smoke*

It seems funny to me now in a sad, ironic kind of way. Parents of all shapes and sizes lovingly warned their children: “Look both ways
before you cross the street.” “Put on your coat so you don’t catch a cold.” “Wash your hands so you don’t get sick.” “Don’t get in the water until thirty minutes after you’ve eaten.” (I still don’t get that one.) Though they did everything within their power to keep us safe and protect us from harm’s way, many parents were unknowingly poisoning their kids with secondhand smoke.

I didn’t realize how unhealthy my home was until I got outside it enough to breathe freely and experience the difference. In fact, after living in a smoke-free environment for the first time ever in my college dorm, when I returned home, I was shocked. The walls, which I remembered as a crisp white, held a dull, yellowish tint. A pale gray film coated the air. Even when no one had a cigarette lit, an unmistakable haze filled the room and enveloped us all. And as soon as I walked in the door, the odor slapped me in the face. Instead of having the comfortable and familiar smell of my home, my old dwelling place smelled like a stale ashtray.

Upon my return to school, my roommate “Spiff” grimaced when I walked into our dorm room. Clearly, my clothes and duffel bag carried the musty smell of cigarette smoke. “You’re rank!” he shouted before throwing my bag in the hallway and telling me to shower.

My stomach sank as it dawned on me. For the first eighteen years of my life, I lived in a cloud of secondhand smoke, oblivious to how it was coating my skin, my lungs, my throat. Not only did I smell like a chimney, but I unknowingly inhaled poison on a daily basis. I didn’t blame my parents; they didn’t know that secondhand smoke is practically as dangerous as inhaling it firsthand. But their ignorance didn’t change the reality of the situation.
I’m proud to say that both my parents overcame their addiction to tobacco and did what many seem unable to do — quit smoking. They recognized that something they enjoyed and accepted had the potential to harm themselves and those they loved most.

I’m convinced that many of us are living in this same kind of dangerous trap with our spiritual health. We know something doesn’t feel quite right, that we’re not growing closer to God and following Christ the way we would like, but we can’t put our finger on it. Even though we believe in God and want to please him, we find it hard to serve him passionately and consistently. We want to move forward spiritually but feel like we’re running against the wind. We want more — we know there’s more — but we just can’t seem to find it.

Why do so many well-meaning Christians take one spiritual step forward, then slide back two? Why do we long for more of God in our lives and yet feel farther and farther away from him? What’s holding us back from growing in this relationship that we claim is our main priority?

While many factors go into answering these questions, ultimately I believe our spiritual enemy blinds us with a smoke screen of poisonous distractions. Just like I lived unaware of the smoke in my home, many people aren’t fully aware of the forces stunting their spiritual growth. Without realizing the impact on their faith, people embrace harmful relationships, consume toxic media, live with addictive habits, and remain oblivious to the long-term effects. We think the way we live is perfectly fine, normal, harmless, or even positive. Some
people don’t want to take an honest look at the way they live, claiming, “What you don’t know won’t hurt you.”

Unfortunately, this just isn’t true. Many individuals who inhaled secondhand smoke — not to mention all the millions of smokers — have suffered permanent and painful physical effects. The truth is this: what many people don’t know is not just hurting them but killing them spiritually.

You’ve probably heard that if you put a frog in a kettle of water and heat the water slowly to a boil, the frog will adjust to the warming water and won’t even realize that it’s boiling to death. How is this possible? The increase in temperature is so graduated that what feels like a warm bath at first becomes a hot tub before kicking into double-boiler mode. By that time, it’s too late. The frog’s body adjusts to his surroundings, never noticing that what surrounds him is draining the life out of him.

In our culture, the water temperature increases daily. Without realizing it, we slowly become acclimated to a toxic environment full of poisonous influences. As the water temperature rises, we keep pretending we’re soaking in a hot tub having the time of our lives, never dreaming that we’re scalding our souls. As we become scarred and desensitized to what is right and wrong, good and evil, life-giving and life-draining, we lose sight of our first love. We move away from God one degree at a time.

**The Devil’s Advocate**

I know firsthand how this process works. Several years after becoming a Christian, I reflected on all the parts of my life that God had
changed. Rather than occasionally telling other people what I thought they wanted to hear—I believe that’s called lying—I allowed God to make me a person of truth. Instead of sharing the latest rumors about mutual friends with others—I think that’s called gossiping—I learned to hold my tongue. While I used to criticize people freely without regard for their feelings or the situation (my old friend self-righteousness), I learned to discern a loving response. Although many of my old ways changed after I gave my life to Christ, my movie-viewing habits didn’t.

My wife, Amy, and I had been married several years when she expressed her concern about the kinds of movies we watched. One evening while we were talking, she gently asked, “Do you really think the movies we’re watching are honoring to God?”

“It’s not like we’re watching porn!” I shot back, offended by her implied accusation. “There’s nothing wrong with enjoying a little entertainment.” Without giving her time to load up on ammunition by citing the last few movies we’d seen, I tried to make a preemptive strike. “Besides, some violence, bad language, and a little sex scene here and there doesn’t really bother me. I’m more than mature enough to handle it.” Perfect—I could make this her problem and not mine!

I’d used that same defense countless times. However, when I heard myself shift into my default setting, the words didn’t sound as convincing as they once had. My wife let it go, but her question remained with me.

A couple of nights later, we met two of our best friends, Scott and Shannon, for dinner and a movie. All through the meal, we discussed
our spiritual growth with lots of God talk. Shannon was learning more about serving God in her daily life. Scott continued to enjoy the blessings of God in his insurance business. Amy talked nonstop about what God was teaching her through her time in the Word. And I talked freely about all the people coming to know Christ through our church. After our thanksgiving-filled dinner, we bought tickets for *The Devil’s Advocate*, a must-see thriller that some friends had recommended.

A few minutes into the movie, the peace, encouragement, and gratitude I’d enjoyed at dinner disappeared. Onscreen violence, bad language, and sexual content that had never bothered me before started to get under my skin. I internally cringed when each F-bomb landed or God’s name was taken in vain. Before long, two women caressed each other. By the end of the movie, we had endured an extended scene in which a ghost explicitly rapes a woman.

We all felt sickened.

I later apologized to Amy. Her loving words stung because I didn’t want to hear them, but they were true. Like the frog in the kettle, I’d become acclimated. Just because something didn’t bother me didn’t mean that it wasn’t having a negative impact. In fact, what did it say about me that filthy language, brutal violence, and explicit sex on the screen didn’t bother me? How had my standards, instead of God’s standards, become the norm?

Now, I don’t believe we should draw a line in the cultural sand and live in a sanitized little bubble. On the other hand, we can’t just immerse ourselves in every aspect of the world around us and let culture determine our lifestyle habits indiscriminately. Most filmmakers
aren’t worrying about the impact of their movie on your soul. Most pop songs on iTunes don’t care whether they build up your faith or draw you closer to God. It is our responsibility to discern what we let into our lives and what we keep out.

If you’re a Christian, wouldn’t you agree that there has to be a line of right and wrong somewhere? A way to discern what pleases God and moves us closer to him instead of farther away? And can we trust our own sensibilities to know what’s truly best for us?

Could it be that we’ve become desensitized to what is right or wrong, good or evil, pleasing or displeasing to our holy God? Is it possible that what we consider normal entertainment could be dangerous to our souls? Do you think that what we consider laughable, entertaining, or simply fun, God might find heartbreaking?

For those of us who follow Jesus, everything we do, no matter where we go, should reflect our love and commitment to him. God is with us just as much when we’re in a dark movie theater laughing at F-bombs from comedic characters as he is when we’re in church singing in the choir.

Everything counts.

Everything that we allow into our minds, hearts, and lives—everything that we spend our time and money on—has an impact on how we grow, or don’t grow, spiritually. As the old computer adage reminds us: garbage in, garbage out. Just as we are what we eat physically, we are also what we consume spiritually. If we don’t monitor and adjust our diet accordingly, our souls are in danger of absorbing more and more lethal poison.
Muddy Waters

The Bible consistently reminds us to check our spiritual diet for toxins. Proverbs 25:26 says, “Like a muddied spring or a polluted well are the righteous who give way to the wicked.” How muddy is your water right now? Is your well polluted by all the cultural toxins seeping in? Or does your spiritual well draw on Living Water as its pure, thirst-quenching source? Maybe you’re a Christian — you’ve been made righteous by Christ — yet you’ve become a muddied spring or a polluted well, and you don’t even know it.

You might believe, “My thoughts don’t matter. As long as they stay tucked away inside my head, they’re not hurting anyone. We all think about things that we’d never do, right?” All the while your negative thoughts are silently poisoning your soul, pouring lies into your spiritual water supply. Unfortunately, our thoughts don’t just stay in our head, disconnected from our words and our actions. Unhealthy thoughts often lead to unhealthy words. Without even knowing it, you might be talking yourself, and others, out of God’s best.

Or maybe it’s the people that you hang with regularly. You know they aren’t full-on for God, but no big deal. You don’t want them to think you’re some kind of religious freak or anything. So you keep doing whatever they do, going wherever they go. Though you believe one thing, you live a totally different way.

Maybe you’ve resigned yourself to certain struggles in your life — anger, lust, discontentment — as nothing more than your personal quirks. “It’s just the way I am,” you tell yourself, all the while your
spiritual enemy laughs at the cancer you continue to feed in your soul.

Rather than experiencing the richness of a dynamic, intimate relationship with the righteous One, you put God in a little box that you can check off your to-do list each week. By settling for rules and religion and feeling pretty good about how much you're doing for the church and those less fortunate, you become blinded to legalism and self-righteousness.

It’s time to come clean.

If you’re tired of the stain of sinful habits discoloring your life, if you long to breathe the fresh, clean, life-giving air of God’s holiness, if you would love to detoxify your soul from guilt, fear, regret, and all the impurities that pollute your relationship with God, then this book is for you. In the pages that follow, we’ll examine the various pollutants that often corrupt our spiritual desire to know and serve God. Some can be avoided as we become more discerning and remove them from our surroundings. Others may linger like smoke in the air but can be managed in ways that will alleviate their impact.

My prayer is that what you read will push you, challenge you, and at times even make you mad. If you’re aware of the truth, then you should be upset, because you’ve been breathing smoke-polluted thoughts, life-draining words, and sin-filled actions without realizing the toll they’re taking on your relationship with God. Deep down, you know there’s a truer way to live, a deeper, purer way to love, and a larger impact to make on the world around you. It’s time to open your eyes, your heart, and your mind to the cleansing power of God’s truth.

His Word is filled with stories of men and women who needed
to come clean, who longed for more. One of my favorites is David, who’s described as “a man after God’s own heart” but, as you may know, was far from perfect. Shortly after he committed adultery and murder, David experienced a soul sickness that affected him on every level — physical, emotional, and spiritual. He knew his sins of lust, entitlement, and deception were killing his heart. He knew the only way to be restored and experience a joyful, fulfilling life again was to come clean before God. In his prayer of repentance, he wrote,

Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin.  
Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;  
wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.  
Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation  
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

— Psalm 51:2, 7, 10, 12

Wouldn’t you like to come clean? To feel your Father’s love wash over you like the cool, crystal waters of a spring-fed stream? To leave the smoke-filled room where you’ve been hiding and come into his life-giving light? To breathe in fresh spiritual air?  
It’s not too late.  
If you want to detoxify your soul and renew your faith, if you want more from your relationship with God, then turn the page.
Part 1

TOXIC BEHAVIORS
Deception Infection

Telling Ourselves the Truth

The ingenuity of self-deception is inexhaustible.

— Hannah Moore

As a pastor, I rarely confess to watching *American Idol*, since it sounds kind of … idolatrous. Nevertheless, I’ve been known to catch a few weeks each season (or maybe all of them, but who’s counting?). My favorites are the first few shows as the panel travels around the country for auditions. If you don’t believe people are easily self-deceived, you only have to watch these tryouts to change your mind. It’s difficult to comprehend how many horrifically bad singers truly believe they deserve to be the next vocal superstar!

While we often laugh (or cringe, if you’re more compassionate than I am) and wonder how a person can be so out of touch with
Toxic Behaviors

reality, so unaware of their utter lack of talent, I’m afraid I actually understand their problem. You see, I have another confession to share with you, one that I’m even more embarrassed to disclose. Growing up, I not only loved to sing, but I thought I was a great singer. I’d wail out “You Ain’t Nothin’ but a Hound Dog” or “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” at the top of my lungs, convinced that it was only a matter of time before I was discovered. Holding my invisible microphone, I’d shake my hips like Elvis, pout my lips like Mick Jagger, and snarl like Billy Idol. No wonder I sounded like a wounded animal!

Convinced of my future stardom, in the fifth grade I auditioned for our grade school choir. The choir consisted of fifty singers; fifty-two kids were trying out. Obviously, two unfortunate wannabes would not make the cut. I figured the odds were clearly stacked in my favor. This was my big chance to let others in on the secret talent that would make me a household name someday.

Yes, you are absolutely correct about what happened at the auditions. I was one of the two that went home crying because I didn’t make the stupid choir! So each time I see some poor clueless young man or woman singing off-key on Idol, surprised at Randy Jackson’s “That’s enough, Dawg,” it’s easy for me to understand their self-deception. What’s more challenging for me to understand is how their friends and family support and perpetuate their delusion. Those poor mothers making obscene gestures at the judges for not recognizing their baby’s amazing vocal talent!

As we see ourselves through the lens of our experiences, beliefs, and perspectives, we all have our blind spots. As the Bible describes the problem, “The heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9). No
Deception Infection

matter how objective we hope to be, our viewpoint is always distorted to some — sometimes large — degree. Here’s the challenge. The longer we view ourselves through a distorted lens, the more likely we are to believe a distorted truth. The longer we lie to ourselves, deceive ourselves, or remain in denial about the truth, the more likely we are to base our decisions and actions on this false belief system.

*Flattery Will Get You Somewhere*

If you’re like most people, when you read about self-deception, it’s easy to think of a few people who fall into that category, but chances are that in your mind, *you* are not one of them. The reason is clear. We don’t know what we don’t know about ourselves. And often we don’t want to know. I believe God put this book into your hands because he loves you so much, he wants to help show you anything in your life that is polluting his plan for you, including your shortcomings and the defenses you may be placing around them.

Since we see ourselves from only one perspective, it’s incredibly difficult to get an accurate picture of ourselves. In order to see into our blind spots, we must use different mirrors held at different angles. I’d like to provide you with some of these mirrors in order to expose the toxic behaviors that tend to sneak up on all of us. They’re often present on a daily basis, and even though we can’t see them, they can accumulate inside us and poison the well of our souls.

Why can’t we see our self-generated toxins? David answers this question in Psalm 36:2 – 3 when he describes a deceived sinner: “In their own eyes they *flatter themselves too much to detect or hate*
Toxic Behaviors

their sin. The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful; they fail to act wisely or do good” (emphasis mine). Notice how David puts it, that some people “flatter themselves too much.” They lie to themselves and don’t even know it. And they’ve become so skilled at self-deception that they cannot detect or confess their sins. Basically, we manufacture our own poison and administer regular doses to ourselves.

Chances are good you know someone like this. Perhaps you have a friend who gossips all the time. He says boastfully, “I don’t gossip; I’m just telling you so you can pray for them.” You and everyone else know he’s a gossip. Or maybe you have a family member who is off-the-charts rude. Yet she would tell you, “I’m not trying to be offensive; I just tell it like it is.” Odds are you know someone who has a drinking problem. Yet this person denies having any problem and adamantly believes he can quit at any time. You might have a friend who thinks he’s God’s gift to women, but you and everyone else know he’s an arrogant, womanizing, self-centered jerk. You possibly work for a woman who thinks she’s a great leader at the office, but everyone else knows that she is a micromanaging, overbearing, control freak. Why don’t these people see it in themselves?


Chances are you do too. You probably know someone who thinks more highly of themselves than they should. Or you might have a
relative who thinks he’s funny, but everyone else thinks he’s annoying. You likely know someone who has a problem but will deny it until the cows come home. It’s hard to be objective about ourselves.

I laughed as I explained to our church that we have a statistical problem. Almost no one in our church believes that they are self-deceived, and yet almost everyone knows someone who is. Why? Because we have an unlimited capacity to deceive ourselves. As we lie to ourselves (“I’m a great singer”), we start to believe our lies. The more we tell the lies, the more we believe they are truth.

Before long, we wholeheartedly embrace a distorted reality skillfully created by a willed ignorance. We deny, suppress, or minimize what is true. By default, we assert, adorn, and elevate what is false. When we finally see the truth, we think the truth is a lie.

We could say it this way: those who don’t know, don’t know that they don’t know. If you are deceived, chances are pretty good you don’t know that you believe something untrue — otherwise you wouldn’t be deceived. If we never identify the lies and replace them with truth, we’ll forever crave a healthy life on a diet of poison and always wonder why we are sick.

**Ticked Off**

So how do we begin identifying our self-told lies and replacing them with truth? Through the process of ruthless self-examination. After my kids spend a long day playing in the woods, I always have them check themselves for ticks. They loathe this somewhat embarrassing self-examination since it requires them to go over every square inch
of their bodies slowly and carefully. But they know that catching a tick early can keep them from getting seriously ill.

Similarly, I’d encourage you to do a thorough internal self-examination. Just as those pesky bloodsuckers jump on you when you enter their environment, spiritual toxins infuse your thinking as you wade through our culture. Take an honest look at the way you live, how you think, and who or what influences you the most. Work hard to be brutally honest.

Examine your life for toxic behaviors — anything you do that cripples your spiritual effectiveness or distracts you from your eternal mission. Look within for toxic emotions — any deep feelings that lead you away from God’s truth. Take an honest look at any unhealthy consumptions — the media you consume, the sites you surf, the people you spend the most time around. The first step to defeating an enemy is to recognize your opponent. Though your enemy might be invisible, God can give you eyes to see.

Let me warn you, though. The closer you get to uncovering a toxic killer in your life, the harder your enemy will fight to keep his grip. If you are like me, you might even unknowingly betray yourself and fight against the change. Denial is often our first line of defense. We’re skilled at taking responsibility for little and justifying much.

Be careful when you hear yourself think or utter these phrases or something similar:

- I don’t have a problem with this.
- It’s really no big deal. This is one way I cope with everything.
- I’m not as bad as most people.
• I can quit anytime I want to.
• This is just the way I am.

Those who are most defensive are often the most unknowingly guilty. It’s been said that the more convinced you are that you’re right, the more likely you are wrong. If you fight back against those trying to help you, chances are you are fighting to keep your own lies intact. If someone who loves you tries to show you a dangerous pattern in your life, you might be 100 percent convinced they are wrong when the truth is they are 100 percent correct.

Peter, in the New Testament, is a perfect example. When Jesus explained that some of the disciples would fall away and deny him, Peter was convinced that he never would. With unshakable confidence, Peter replied, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will” (Matt. 26:33, emphasis mine). Can you hear his self-deceived confidence?

As he flattered himself, Peter was unaware of his toxic self-deception. In the very next verse, we find Jesus explaining that before the rooster crows, Peter will deny Jesus three times. But Peter stood his ground and declared, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” (Matt. 26:35, emphasis mine). Sure enough, before the day ended, not one, not two, but — count ’em — three different times Peter denied even knowing who Jesus was.

If someone has been trying to show you something about yourself and you continue to fight it, maybe it’s time to acknowledge that you might be deceived. Your spouse might be convinced you have a problem with painkillers or alcohol or another drug, but you stand your
ground and say that you don’t. Someone might have told you that you’re addicted to video games or social media, but you don’t believe it. Maybe several loved ones have told you that you are a workaholic, but you don’t stop working to listen. If you find yourself resisting or fighting back, be careful. Those who are most convinced are often the most deceived. Be careful not to flatter yourself so much that you cannot detect or hate your own sin.

No Laughing Matter

Since it is hauntingly easy to deceive ourselves, we need outside help to become more objective about our blind spots. And if our shields are up and our defenses are operating at full force, we may not be hearing what those around us are saying. Sometimes if we really want to change, we must ask God to show us what’s true about how we’re thinking, talking, and living.

In my early years at our church, people complained to me regularly that I was being unnecessarily crude when I preached. To them, some of my illustrations and humor crossed the line of what’s appropriate. I told myself that they were just being prudish and didn’t understand my sense of humor and strategy.

Though more people complained, I stood my ground. After all, if they had known me before I was a Christian, they’d be blown away by how much I’d improved. Besides, my slightly off-color humor was connecting with unchurched people, men and women visiting our church for the first time. I couldn’t help it if these other “legalistic” people didn’t have the freedom that I enjoyed.
Many of our church’s most faithful leaders set up meeting after meeting to talk to me about my “problem.” To be honest, I was growing weary of their incessant complaints. They just weren’t as evangelistic as I was and obviously didn’t have a good sense of humor. At the end of what seemed like the hundredth meeting about my jokes, an exceptionally wise older gentleman asked me to pray. “Since you’re convinced you’re not doing anything wrong,” he continued sincerely, “would you ask God to show you if he would have you change?” Just to get this guy off my back, I reluctantly agreed to pray, although I knew it wouldn’t change my stance.

Not wanting to break my word, a few days later I half-heartedly prayed something like, “God, I know all these people are wrong, but if there is something you need to show me about cleaning up my act, please do.”

Be careful what you pray for.

The very next Sunday, my oldest daughter, Catie, who was seven at the time, came to “big church” and sat with my wife, Amy, while I preached. I glanced at my innocent daughter, smiling attentively and holding her Precious Moments Bible proudly in its pink case. Right as I was about to begin with a colorful joke, I hesitated. In one sweeping moment, God showed me clearly. I had been crude.

When I was about to say something that was truly funny but not totally clean, I realized that I wouldn’t want my seven-year-old daughter saying the very phrase I was about to say while preaching. In fact, if I heard her say the words that I was about to say, I’d correct her and tell her it wasn’t appropriate.

Busted.
If I don’t want my daughter telling this joke, why should I?

For so long, I had been blind to my toxic words and risqué humor. All along I thought I was funny and reaching people who normally didn’t go to church. Even when I was convinced my method was solid, everyone else knew I was behaving immaturely at best and sinfully at worst.

Since we can’t change what we can’t identify, ask God to show you any areas of your life that may be harmful to you, offensive to the people around you, or displeasing to God himself.

**Talk to Me**

God speaks to us in many ways. He speaks through his Word. He speaks through circumstances. He speaks through his Spirit. And he speaks through people. As you seek God, listen carefully to what he might say to you through the people around you. Proverbs 15:31 – 32 says, “He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding” (NIV 1984 ed., emphasis mine).

I love the phrase “life-giving rebuke.” Occasionally, God will send someone to communicate a strong and important message through a life-giving rebuke. It’s important to note, not all rebukes are life-giving and helpful. Certainly you’ve been broadsided by some life-taking rebukes. You know, when some jerk criticizes or belittles you in a hurtful way or over something insignificant that allows the jerk to look better than you. Instead of making things better, they make things worse.
But there are times that a loving person gives a life-giving rebuke. They care about you enough to confront you lovingly. Like the church members who tried to help me see how my crude humor was hurting the church, loving people may take some risks to help you see the truth. When they do, listen.

For several years, loved ones tried to help me with another one of my blind spots. As a pastor, I prided myself in relating well with other people — showing grace, kindness, and patience. Though I was convinced I was good at interacting socially, several close people told me that I wasn’t as good as I thought.

Amy was among several who expressed that I really needed to improve my people skills. She explained soberly that I often looked distracted, rushed, or bored when talking to people in the lobby after church. I replied truthfully that I often did feel distracted, rushed, or bored, but only because there were so many other people to talk to, and I had lots to do — and to top it off, some people were boring! They blab on and on and on and on. To me, if I wasn’t good with people, it was someone else’s fault.

After years of listening to me defend myself, Amy and a couple of her friends showed me what I do when talking to people. With a playful spirit, they acted like they were me talking to someone else. They showed me how my body language communicated disinterest, as I’d look around the room or act distracted. They demonstrated how I’d often turn slightly away from the person talking to me.

When they showed me how I acted, I defended myself, saying, “Sure, I might do that, but it’s on purpose. I’m sending a subtle signal that I can’t talk forever because there are many more people who need
my attention.” As the words came out of my mouth, I had the same feeling as when I looked at my daughter in the crowd.

Busted again.

I truly love the people that I lead. But my actions, words, and body language had been communicating the opposite. Once I listened to those closest to me, I could finally make improvements. Now I work hard to focus on the person who is in front of me, putting my whole heart into the conversation. Several people have expressed that they have noticed the change and cite tremendous improvement.

Please listen to what your loved ones have been trying to tell you. If more than one person has told you that you have a problem with something, chances are pretty good you have a problem. If all your close friends worry about you because you overspend each month, you likely have a problem with overspending. If your parents, best friends, sorority sisters, and co-workers all tell you that you are dating a good-for-nothing jerk, you are probably dating well below yourself. If everyone you love and trust expresses concern about your eating habits and weight, you probably should put the fork down and listen.

Now would be a good time to stop and ask yourself honestly, “Is there something that God has been trying to show me through his Word or trusted people that I need to hear?” I can promise you that if you’ll listen, God will speak to you as you read prayerfully through this book. If you think you are without fault, remember Scripture says in 1 John 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” I’m praying that God will move the deception out of our hearts so the truth can come in.
When God reveals spiritual toxins that need to be cleansed, I pray you will have the courage to act swiftly and decisively. James said it well in 1:22, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

When we know the Word and don’t do what it says, we are in direct disobedience to God—living a toxic life that he cannot bless. When God shows you what to do, do it immediately. I’ve heard it said that “delayed obedience is disobedience.”

If you’re living with your boyfriend or girlfriend and know you shouldn’t be compromising, move out or get married. If the number of Twitter followers or Facebook friends has become an idol to you, it’s time to tear that idol down until you can manage it in a healthy fashion. If you are consumed with worry, call it what it is: a sin. You are distrusting the promises and power of God. Quit sanctifying the sin of worry by calling it “concern” and do what it takes to renew your mind with God’s truth. If you believe you are fat but you weigh only 107 pounds, admit that you have a problem. It’s time to get help.

You can’t change what you don’t see. It’s time to see the truth. You may be tempted to argue, “But I’m not a bad person.” May I say respectfully and lovingly, “Yes, you are—and so am I.” We are all selfish, sinful people. The Bible tells us our hearts are deceitful above all things. Jesus—the only one who is good—is the remedy for our poison.

When you clearly identify what is slowly killing you (which is far more difficult than it sounds), you can take the toxic influences to
Jesus for cleansing, purifying, and healing. When we identify the lies we so readily tell ourselves, his truth can set us free.

By God’s power, we must drop the masks and tell the truth. Think about it. Why do we so readily deceive ourselves? The answer is simple and life transforming: we deceive ourselves because we are afraid of the truth. The very thing we fear is what we need most. Because when we know the truth, the truth will set us free (John 8:32).

Stop lying to yourself, swallowing the poisonous self-deceptions that keep you from experiencing healthy spiritual growth. Admit the truth. Come clean. If you’re willing, the truth will set you free.