

COME AND SEE!



Come Near to Jesus! 1

An INCREDIBLE Offer 2

A Letter from Jesus 4

Come Near to God 5

Open Your Shades 6

Your Small Important Part! 10

To Be in Love With Jesus 11

"Come to ME" 12

Ears That Listen! 13

Soils of the Heart 14

Hear! Retain! Persevere! 17

Be Careful How You Listen 18

Your Satellite Dish 20

Humility and Honesty 21

Pride Cheats! 22

Correction and Humility 23

Open Up Room for Jesus 24

How Can You Love Truth? 25

Wilder Than Your Wildest Dreams 27



AN INCREDIBLE OFFER

Imagine that the adults in your life offered you something INCREDIBLE. All you had to do was to be diligent and apply yourself in some particular way...

Maybe horses are your favorite animal, so some adults promised to build you a stable right in your own yard and fill it with horses! All you had to do was "dig in" and really learn something they asked you to learn. Or perhaps you really like dolphins, so they offered you a giant tank *filled* with dolphins in your own backyard. Maybe instead they offered you your very own old-fashioned, full-sized sailing ship, like sea captains used to command. Wow!

If the offer was for something THAT big and unbelievable, do you think you would need to be reminded to care about your part? Would someone have to tell you to be focused in working towards your goal? Do you think your parents would have to say, "Don't forget about working hard so you can have the horses"? Would they have to remind you, "Don't forget to be focused so you can get your sailing ship"?

No way! You wouldn't forget the promise for one minute! I'm sure you would work hard and do all the studying, reading, practicing, or whatever it took to earn that incredible reward. Even if you had to carry a book around with you wherever you went, you wouldn't mind. The hope of getting that prize would give you all the energy you needed to put aside EVERYTHING else so you could focus on your goal.

Well, I don't think we've got any stables or ships or dolphins waiting for you!
But did you know that somebody has made you a bigger offer than that?
I'm serious!!!

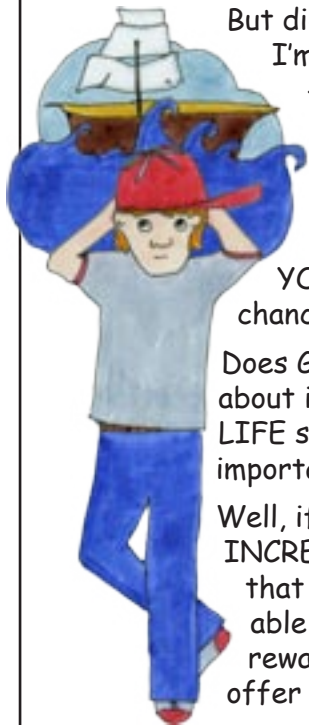
The God who created the whole universe has offered YOU the chance to be His friend forever and ever. Think about it: There's a God who made our world, who invented the giraffe, who figured out how each animal should look and sound and move, who designed the human eye, and who put each galaxy in its place waayyyyyyyyy up there. Well, THAT God is offering YOU the chance to be His very own friend and child! He's offering YOU the chance to KNOW Him and be CLOSE to Him. Does that sound special, or what?

Does God's offer seem as special inside YOU as the offer of horses or ships? Think about it honestly. Don't just answer based on what you SHOULD say. What does your LIFE say? How about today? Did you treat God's offer as if it was AT LEAST as important as the offer of a dolphin tank?

Well, if you didn't, then I'm challenging you to fight for GOD'S offer to FEEL just as INCREDIBLE in your heart as those other prizes. Will you do that? You see, I know that if you really understand WHO it is that is offering you Himself, you won't be able to resist. It WILL consume your thoughts, just like one of those really big rewards would, and even more!!! So I challenge you to fight and fight until God's offer is just as important to you as anything else you can imagine.

How can you fight? Well, one thing you could do is to let everything around you be an opportunity to think about Him. If you see a sunset, ask yourself why God made it pink. He didn't have to, you know! He could have made a brown sunset. But, instead, He made it pink. Why? Next time you see a big tree, take a minute to just stand there and look at it. Think. WHY did God make trees look that way? Why are they so pretty? HOW did He create them?

As you think about the amazing things He has done, remind yourself that the SAME God who invented all of these incredible animals and plants and stars WANTS to be your Friend, your Father, your God. He wants to be very close to you.



Maybe it's still hard for you to imagine how BIG this offer really is. Let's try to illustrate it again.

Let's pretend you are somebody who would really want the horses and stable as a reward. What if you found out that you actually weren't going to get a real stable with horses in it? Instead, you were only going to have a tiny toy stable with some plastic horses? Would you still be just as motivated and excited? Probably not! Little plastic toys just wouldn't be as important or appealing to you as real horses, would they? Obviously, there's a real difference between a plastic horse and a real one, right?

Well, the truth is that all of the "neat" things in the whole world are just like plastic toys compared to the INCREDIBLE things God is offering to you!!! What He wants to give you is so special. It is over a million-billion times as special as having real horses or real ships of your own. If you don't feel inside that His offer to you is really all that important, will you FIGHT to change how you see it??? FIND OUT how WONDERFUL HE IS!

Did you know that GOD (the Creator of the whole universe) is actually thinking about YOU right now?!?! Well, He is. In Psalm 40:17, David said, "As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord is thinking about me right now." YOU are always on His mind. He doesn't get distracted and later on remember, "Oh, I need to think about that child." No, He is ALWAYS thinking about you!

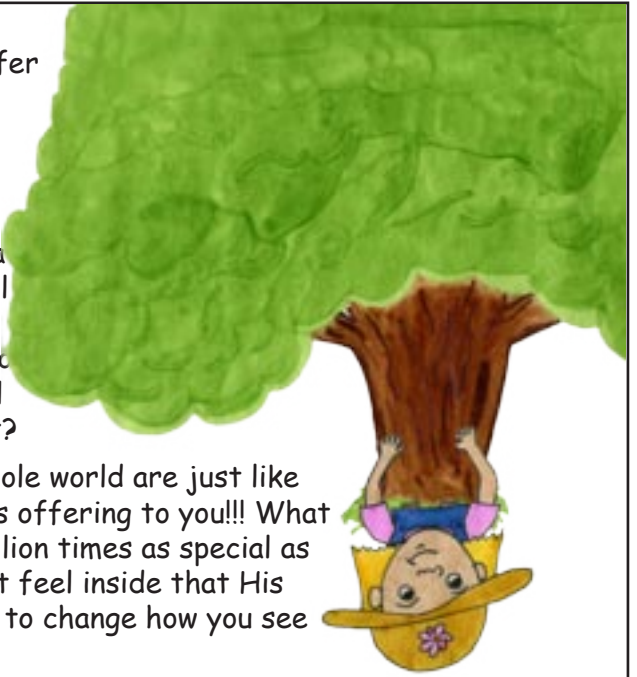
God had YOU in mind when He made the world with all its pretty sunsets, colorful fish, and gallant horses. He was thinking about YOU when Jesus died. In fact, the Scriptures tell us that He was thinking about YOU before He made the world. He was thinking of things that He was already planning for YOU. No joke!!! Think about THAT for a while. Let yourself be softened and impressed with the fact that He is not only thinking of you now, but already was thinking of you before He even created the earth. WOW!!!

And, you know what He wants from you? He doesn't want you to do some really hard thing like jump to the moon or swim across the ocean or memorize all of the prepositions in the English language or learn 100 mathematical formulas. He doesn't even ask us to do EVERYTHING just right all the time before we can be His friends. NO, that's not what He asks.

God wants to know if you will surrender your life to Him! Will you surrender your right to be captain of your own life, your right to decide what you are going to think and do? Will you give up your right to be silly, to always have fun, or to be the center of attention?

He doesn't demand some HUGE thing of us. "Just give Me yourself! It's why you were made, after all. I'll take such good care of you—so good that you wouldn't believe Me if I told you!"

Won't you think about HIM more than the things that are right in front of your face? There is no other offer more important than the one God holds out for you. "I want to be your friend. Will you think about Me?" He wants to hold you in the palm of His hand. Do you want to be there? FOREVER???



A LETTER FROM JESUS



Dear Ones,

You have heard a lot about Me. That's because I chose you to be born where I make my home—right in the middle of some of My people. But hearing about Me isn't the same as Tasting and Touching Me for yourself. I want you to know Me!

One day I was nailed to a cross to pay the penalty for your sin. I suffered in unbelievable agony. When stakes were hammered into My body, the pain was brutal. When the weight of My bloodied body pulled against the three spikes that pierced My hands and feet, it hurt more than you can imagine. It was more than a person's mind can take. But that pain wasn't the worst part of My cross!

The most painful, terrifying thing I experienced in My thirty-three years in a human body wasn't caused by whips or nails. It was caused by sin! All of your sins separated Me from My Father.

You see, my Father decided before the world was ever created that I would come to earth to rescue each person from their sin. I had to take on the guilt for every selfish act you have ever done or bad attitude that you have ever had. The pain was terrible because it kept Me separated from My Father, My Dad. As a penalty for *your* sins, I felt the loss of My Father's Presence. Until then, He had always been so close to Me. It was then—when I was separated from My Father—that I tasted the Darkness and Death that you have known.

If you have not yet known Me first-hand, you have only lived in this Separation. I do not want it to stay that way. Do not think yourself alive until you have Touched Me! Never let yourself feel at home in this world without Me! I made you for Myself. Search for Me! You will find Me when you search with ALL your heart. I promise!

Yours Truly,

Jesus

COME NEAR TO GOD



"Come near to God and He will come near to you." God really said that! It's a scripture in the book of James. God has made a promise, and He NEVER breaks His promises. He is saying to you, "If you will come near to Me, I promise that I will come near to you." Do you understand?

I'd call that a great and precious promise, wouldn't you? That's an incredible promise that God has offered to anybody who would take advantage of it.

Maybe you've seen videos about Jesus, or maybe you've imagined what it would have been like to be with Him when He lived on earth. Children, as well as adults, could really choose to follow a man who they could see. It's a little different for you. You have to pursue a Jesus that you can't see with your eyes. But you know what? It's really the same thing.



In talking with parents before, I've heard some of them say, "When my son was about 10, he would go up into his room and be so quiet that we'd go in and check on him. You know what? We would find him praying! Or we would find him reading his Bible. It wasn't that we had asked him to do it. He was pursuing Jesus because he wanted to. He was interested, because it was his way of seeking God. Reading or praying was a way for him to come near to God and to understand God's mind."

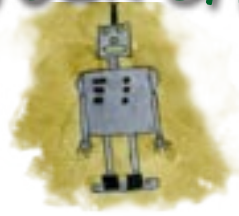
Another mom talked about how her daughter would ask questions. The child would talk about sin in her life. She wasn't afraid. She had nothing to hide. A lot of children wish they could hide their sins. They try to forget about them just as soon as they have been disciplined for them. But this girl wanted to talk about it. What about you? If you see something that's ugly inside of yourself, please be willing to talk to your parents or other adults who can help you. Getting your sins into the light and being honest about them means you are making progress.

I'll just repeat that promise one more time. Remember, this is a promise that God has made to YOU!

"Come near to ME and I will come near to you!"



OPEN YOUR SHADES



Once upon a time in a living room, in a gathering that included some adult Christians and several children, a nine-year-old asked this question:



"Life seems like a bunch of details. You wake up. You eat breakfast. You work on math. Then you work on something else. Then you play for a little bit, and then it's time for lunch. In the afternoon, you do some more studying, and then you go to the library and stop by the store. You come home, unpack the groceries, and get ready for dinner. Some other people come over to eat, and then it's time to go to bed. And then it starts all over again. How do you get to know God in all of that?"

Here is one adult's answer:

Have you ever heard the verse that says, "Unless a seed falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit"? Unless that seed falls apart until it's unrecognizable, that's all it will ever be—just a seed.

You can take an apple seed and put it on a shelf. It will just sit there forever and ever, but it will always be alone. It will never make an apple. It's not really alive. It has the ability to make a living tree, but as long as it stays a seed on a shelf, it's useless. BUT if you bury that seed in the ground and let moisture, temperature, and rain crack it open, then the life that's always been inside can begin to come out.

In the scriptures, God is telling us that life is like that. You're kind of like a seed. You need to be cracked open! That means dying to your selfishness and giving your life to God. Like a seed falling to the ground, there's a dying involved before there can be life.

Let's say that it's Tuesday and you wake up in the morning. You're taught at home, so you're not going off to school. What's the first thing on your mind? Is your first thought, "What are we going to do today? What's going to be for breakfast? When will I get to play? I'm supposed to get my math done by noon. I can do that! Let's see, there's volleyball tonight..."

Is that what your mind goes to—having fun, doing stuff, and the other details of life? OR does your day start with you deciding, on purpose, to ask God, "Today is another day to know You. Please show Yourself to me through the circumstances of my life. Please show me who I



am, too. I want this day to be about You—not just about 'stuff,' but about You. Help me see You. Help me learn something new about You. Help me understand what thoughts or attitudes I can get rid of to help me know You better."

NOW you have started your day right! Coming near to God doesn't necessarily mean changing your activities during the day. It does mean making sure that you think about God during those activities, rather than just thinking about yourself and what you want.

So let's say your day has started, and it's time for breakfast. Is this a meal you are sharing with God, or are you just kind of eating it—"Hey, my favorite cereal!"—and then moving on to the next thing? You can include God even during breakfast by being thankful. "Cocoa Puffs are really cool! Thanks, God!" You can crack your heart open to Him, or you can stay alone, like that seed on the shelf.

The whole day, you are either going to be by yourself, or you will be with Someone else. That's true not just for one day, but for the rest of your life. Alone or with Someone? Make the right decision, and you can have an awareness of God that keeps on growing, growing, growing.

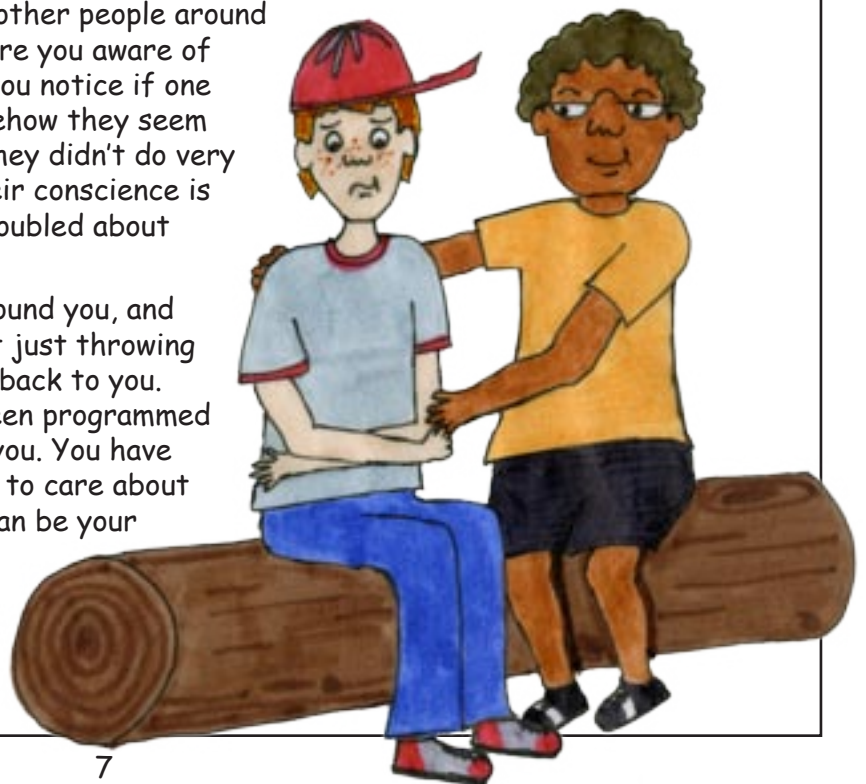
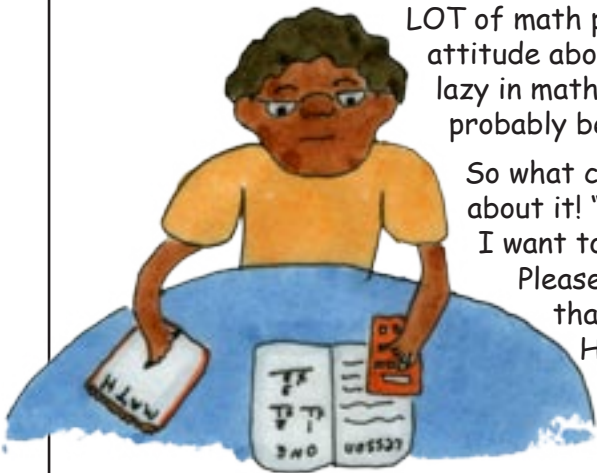
OK, breakfast is over. Now it's 9:00 and time to work on math. You have a LOT of math problems to get done. What's your attitude? God cares. Your attitude about math matters to Him. Are you going to be lazy? If you're lazy in math, then you're training yourself to be a lazy person. You'll probably be pretty lazy about coming near to God, too.

So what can you do about this hard math assignment? You talk to God about it! "I was just daydreaming. God, I don't want to be that way. I want to be diligent in my math. My mom wants me to do this work. Please help me! You see what my heart is like. I don't want to be that kind of person. Please help me be a hard worker instead. Help me to learn through math what kind of person you want me to be." Math isn't just about adding numbers then, is it? And the "seed" of your life will be cracking open to God!

You finish your work, and you get to play for a while. You go outside to join some other children who are throwing a Frisbee.

You are caught up in your play. It's fine to enjoy yourself. But are your eyes open? Are you alone, really by yourself even though there are other people around and even though God is everywhere? Or are you aware of things going on outside yourself? Would you notice if one of your friends seemed a little sad? Somehow they seem troubled. Would you think, "I wonder if they didn't do very good on their math today. I wonder if their conscience is feeling a little guilty. Or could they be troubled about something else?"

Your eyes can be looking at the people around you, and you can be caring about them. You are not just throwing them a Frisbee so that they can throw it back to you. They are not just like robots who have been programmed to play with you. They are real people to you. You have an opportunity to look into their eyes and to care about them—and care about God as well. That can be your attitude all the way through the day. It's your choice. Will you be just by yourself, or will you open your heart to God and to the people around you?



The rest of your day is the same way. Add whatever activity comes next. You are either a giver with your eyes open, or you are a taker with your eyes closed. Takers don't really see the world around them. Do I see Debbie bringing me a plate of food, or do I just see a plate of food coming to me? Am I connecting with a person, or am I just getting or doing stuff? What's happening inside my mind and heart?

The description of somebody who is on the wrong road, really, or not yet started in the right direction, is that they are remaining alone. You can be alone, right now, in the middle of a room full of people. You can be withdrawn and keep the window-shades of your heart closed—like pulling shut the shades in your house. You can be all closed up, just like a house. You are not really open towards God or towards the people around you.

Does that last paragraph describe you? Then your job is to open those shades. Rip them open! OPEN your heart towards God. OPEN your heart towards other people. Take responsibility for the things in your character that are unlike God. Apologize. Repent. Make efforts to do better. Ask for help from God. Ask for help from those working with you. "I'm kind of sloppy in this thing. Can you help me? I know God is not sloppy like me. See my handwriting? See how I am doing my work? How can this be better? I know that God is a God of order. I know that I am a child of chaos. Heaven and earth are not in agreement here! What's wrong?"

You can ask for help because you want to be like God. You don't just want to turn in a neat paper so you can get smiley faces or stars on it. Who cares about the smiley faces and stars? What matters is what's happening inside of you. Are you becoming like God in your ways and attitudes and responses, or are you not?

Two children can look just the same. Both may play kickball for two hours. But one child played kickball with God and other people, while the other child played kickball by himself with "robots" in a dead, blank world. The difference is inside the heart—not in the activities going on outside.

Of course sometimes it's right to pull away completely from all the busyness and just be alone with God. There is time for that. But coming near to God isn't like a light switch you can turn off or on. "I was praying, but now I'm playing kickball." No, we stick with God through the whole day with our eyes wide open. We want to see what He's doing and know what He's thinking.

Do you remember the time when King David was traveling with his army and a man started yelling bad things about him and throwing rocks and dirt down on him?

The soldiers asked, "Do you want us to go kill that guy? We'll go take care of him right now." But David said, "No! I just wonder if God might be trying to let me know that He's displeased with me? I just have this feeling." David's eyes were open! He didn't just see a man who was throwing rocks at him. David was listening for God at every opportunity. "I have an idea, a hint, that this might be God wanting to get my attention." That's how he viewed it.

That same event could have turned out much differently. "A mean guy threw rocks at me today, so I had my army kill him." That's what King Saul would have done. He would have never even wondered if God were involved somehow. You never would have heard Saul say, "I wonder if that's God trying to get my attention?" It would have never entered Saul's mind. He wasn't like David. He wasn't a spiritual man. He was remaining alone.

You can have fun. That is part of God's heart—to run, skip, play, and laugh. But not in a selfish,



self-centered way, with your eyes shut and with your whole world revolving around you. I don't know how to explain that part any better. Some people live like the shades are drawn completely around them. They are all by themselves in a room full of people. Their hearts are not open towards God or other people. The path to knowing God has to do with ripping your heart open and letting go of your worries and distractions and fears so you can come near to Him.



You will see bad things about yourself if your eyes are open. But those things are what you can talk about when you turn towards Him and ask for His forgiveness. You can ask Him for help with them. At the same time, you will also see things about Him that will touch your heart and put a spring in your step!

If your eyes are wide open, then you can come near to God while you're studying birds in your science book! Maybe all that most students learn is what cardinals eat and how far geese fly. They only notice the facts on the page because of who they are on the inside. Their shades are down. They may learn the facts and get "A's" on their papers. They might even learn to write neatly. But none of it is really about God for them. They aren't reaching out towards God at all. Their hearts are closed.

You can start coming near to God now, even at age nine. Things will get easier later, when you've truly been born again. But even now, God "rewards those who diligently seek Him." That's what He says in Hebrews 11. He blesses those who are passionate about coming near to Him. I suspect that most of you don't live your days that way. You may not wake up in the morning thinking about "Abba, Father" and wanting to know Him. You may not be focused on wanting to be changed. That's probably not what's usually on your mind. But it needs to be if you are going to become who God really wants you to be.

God has a BIG dream for you. Don't just settle for a small piece of the dream. He has BIG plans for your life. But He is only going to give His dream to people who want it. Like Jesus said, the people who receive are the ones who "knock and keep on knocking, and ask and keep on asking." Don't be satisfied with just a little taste. "Yeah, I felt guilty one time in my conscience about something, so I made it right." No, coming near to God is either HOW YOU LIVE, or it's just a little thing you do every now and then.

God will notice what's important to you. If God's dream, God's Kingdom, and God Himself are what matter to you, you will be rewarded. If not, He will let you sit all by yourself in your own little world with your shutters closed. God won't open those shutters for you. He will INVITE you to open them. God wants you to see the world that He has made out there—so that you may KNOW Him.

YOUR SMALL IMPORTANT PART!

"Come near to Me, and I'll come near to you." Of those two things, which is more important?

Obviously, God coming near to you is **10 million times** more important than any effort you would make to come near to Him! Still, He did choose that order. Your part is listed before God's part. And God made His part conditional:

Your part is so small, it hardly means anything! It does require something from you, even though it doesn't really "accomplish" or "earn" anything. But I promise if you'll do your little part and move towards Me, I'll honor your desire by moving towards you. And you'll see that being close to Me is where the really good stuff is!



TO BE IN LOVE WITH JESUS



"What do I need to do if I really, really, really want with all my heart to be in love with Jesus?"

That's a question that you children can be thinking about even now. The answer is that there is a *lot* I can do if I really, really, really want to love Him.



I can think about Him. I can look at Him. I can consider what is important to Him. I can spend my time around people who I know love Him. It makes sense that if I want to love Jesus, then I'm naturally going to want to spend time with people who already do love Him. I'm going to put time and effort into discovering how to love Him.

There is no guarantee for any of us that a relationship with God is just going to "happen" somehow. It's not reasonable to think that one day all of a sudden we are going to love Jesus. But as children, even now, you can begin making decisions to care about Him. You can believe that He is real

and talk to Him, knowing that He is there and knowing that He hears you. You can know for a fact that He already loves you!

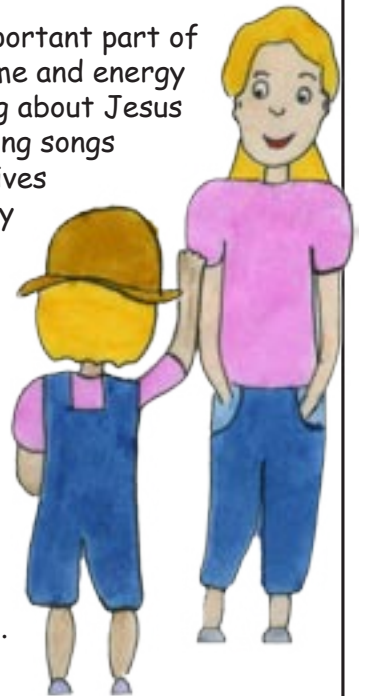
The scriptures say that the way we are changed to be like Jesus—and an important part of how we fall in love with Him—is "beholding" Him. That means spending our time and energy looking at Him, *looking* at Him, **LOOKING** at Him! We put effort into thinking about Jesus and caring about what He cares about. We gaze upon Jesus' loveliness. We sing songs to Him. We make time to be with those who we know—by the fruit of their lives and by the look on their faces—love Him. If I want to love someone that they already love, then I am going to be tugging on their shirt sleeve and asking them, "Can you tell me more about this Jesus that you love? Can you tell me more about this Person that seems to change your life and attitudes and character?"

It's a very simple thought, but the answer really isn't much more complicated than that. Our goal isn't to live life the "right way." We are just on this planet so we can learn to love Jesus with all of our hearts, souls, minds and strength—with all of our energy and affection. We are here to love HIM.



Children, don't wait for some day when you are older—15, 25, or 50. Don't think, "When I get older, I will give my life to Jesus just like so and so did." Even now, even though you may not understand the sin that crucified your Savior yet, at least **START** towards Him!

Jesus is the answer for every question and the healing for every wound! So if you are just 6, 8, or 12, even now begin spending your heart's energy to think and care about what is important to Him. It's as we look at Jesus that we fall in love with Him.



"COME TO ME"

"Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. A branch cannot produce fruit alone but must remain in the vine. In the same way, you cannot produce fruit alone but must remain in Me. I am the vine, and you are the branches. If any remain in Me and I remain in them, they produce much fruit. But without Me they can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

Jesus is saying to us:

I AM ALIVE!

I AM THE WAY.

TURN TO ME.

TRUST ME.

COME TO ME.

REMAIN IN ME.

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. The only way to the Father is through Me" (John 14:6).

"And this is eternal life: that people know you, the only true God, and that they know Jesus Christ, the One you sent" (John 17:3).

"Come to Me, all of you who are tired and have heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Accept my teachings and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit, and you will find rest for your lives. The burden that I ask you to accept is easy; the load I give you to carry is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to Me and drink. If anyone believes in Me, rivers of living water will flow out from that person's heart, as the Scripture says" (John 7:38-39).

"You, Lord, give true peace to those who depend on you, because they trust you. So, trust the Lord always, because he is our Rock forever" (Isaiah 26:3-4).

EARS THAT LISTEN



SOILS OF THE HEART



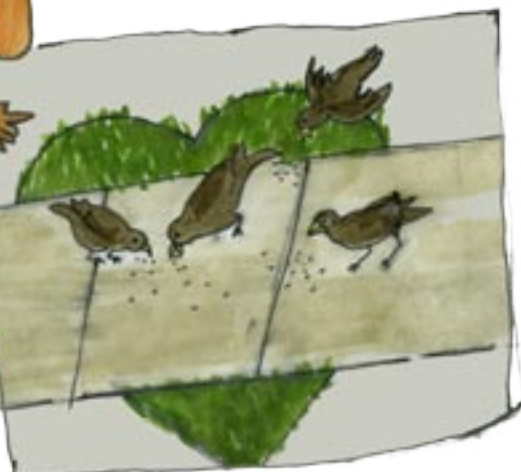
When a great crowd was gathered, and people were coming to Jesus from every town, He told them this story: "A farmer went out to plant his seed. While he was planting, some seed fell by the road. People walked on the seed, and the birds ate it up. Some seed fell on rock, and when it began to grow, it died because it had no water. Some seed fell among thorny weeds, but the weeds grew up with it and choked the good plants. And some seed fell on good ground and grew and made a hundred times more."

As Jesus finished the story, He called out, "Let those with ears use them and listen! This is what the story means: The seed is God's message. The seed that fell beside the road is like the people who hear God's teaching, but the devil comes and takes it away from them so they cannot believe it and be saved. The seed that fell on rock is like those who hear God's teaching and accept it gladly, but they don't allow the teaching to go deep into their lives. They believe for a while, but when trouble comes, they give up. The seed that fell among the thorny weeds is like those who hear God's teaching, but they let the worries, riches, and pleasures of this life keep them from growing and producing good fruit. And the seed that fell on the good ground is like those who hear God's teaching with good, honest hearts and obey it and patiently produce good fruit. (Luke 8:4-8, 11-15)

In His story, Jesus talked about four different kinds of soil. Seed fell on each of them. But the outcome for each kind of soil was very different. Jesus explained that He was really talking about people, not farming. He said that there are basically four types of people. You can tell what kind of person you are by what you do when God's Word—His seed—falls on your heart.

The hard walking path stands for one kind of person. What would happen if you took a bunch of seed and threw it on a sidewalk? Would that seed ever sprout? Would there ever be any plant at all? No. The seed would just sit there until some bird spotted it. Seed doesn't penetrate a hard path.

A lot of people are like that path. It's not like they hear God's Word and understand it, but decide to do something different instead. The Word actually never makes an impact on people like that. It never touches anything inside of them. Probably the vast majority of people are hard like that path at least one time or another in their lives. The Word has no way to penetrate. They don't care enough to let it into their hearts, so it doesn't stay with them.



In Jesus' story, the birds came and ate the seed. Birds are that way. If you put seed on the driveway, you'll see flocks of birds in no time. A bird will even try to peck seed out of the lawn if it can. If you leave seed on the road in plain view, they'll find it and eat it within minutes. It's the same way with the devil. He's God's enemy. He hates God's Word. If people don't care enough to let the Word deep into their hearts, the devil will just snatch it from their minds right away. None of that seed will ever grow, because the listeners' hearts are hard. They've got other things they care more about right now, so the

Word has no effect. It never will make an impact unless they soften their hearts.

Now, the other three kinds of soil are different. They all respond to the seed, at least at first. The seed takes root a little bit and begins to germinate and grow. There is at least a baby plant there in each of those soils. Of the four different kinds of hearts that Jesus talked about, only one completely ignores the Word. Nothing at all happens when they hear it. It doesn't take root at all. Only one of the soils was that hard. But two of the other soils were *just as bad* as the path, even though the seed looked like it was off to a good start!

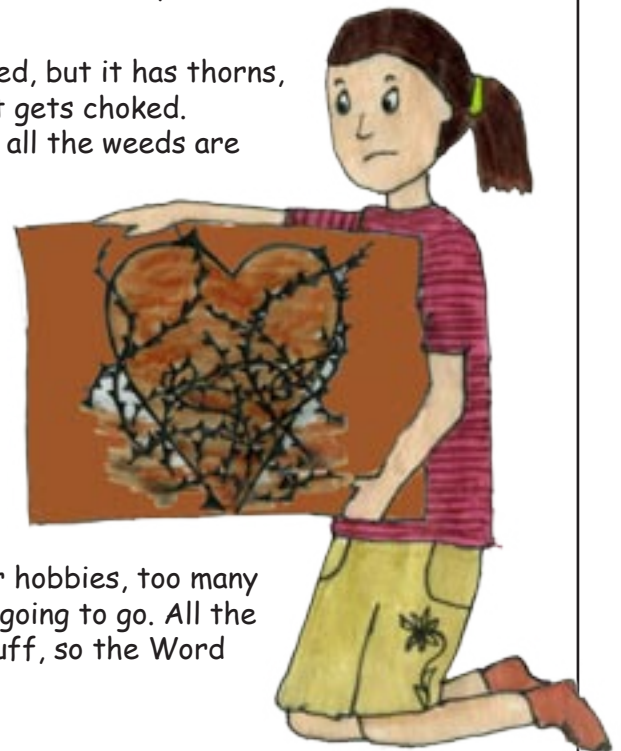
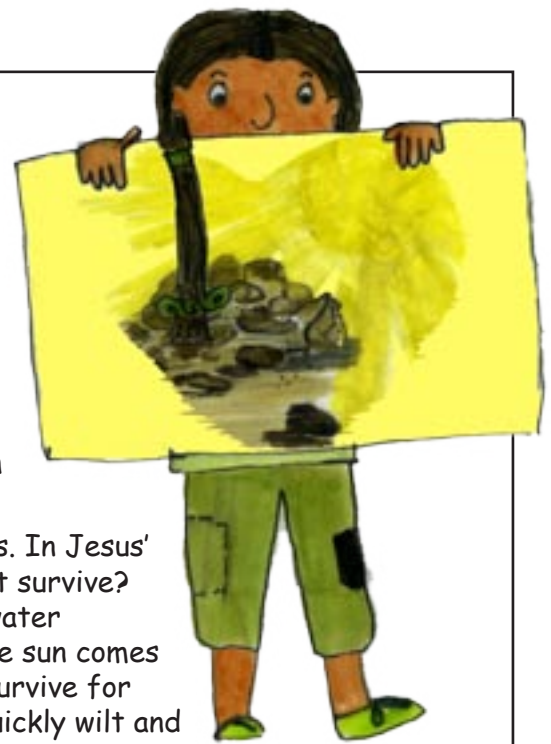
Soil number two has some soft dirt, but it also has a lot of rocks. In Jesus' story, what happened to the plant in rocky ground? Why didn't it survive? It couldn't get its roots deep enough to get water. When does water become especially important? Having deep roots is vital when the sun comes out. If it is going to be in the shade all the time, a plant might survive for quite a while without much water. But bright, hot sunlight will quickly wilt and eventually kill a plant that can't get to a deeper water source.

Jesus was comparing the rocky soil to someone who gets excited when they hear the Word of God. It seems like the Word is springing to life, like the seed on that ground. But this type of person doesn't handle the pressures of persecution and temptation. Something happens that makes life a little hard, and they give up. Although the seed they hear, God's Word, is good, their hearts are rocky. Their roots don't go deep enough to get to the Living Water that they need if they are going to survive and thrive during the tough times. Their faith in Jesus doesn't go very deep. Maybe people at work or old friends or unsaved family members have started giving them a hard time for their faith. Maybe the devil has started tempting them with a certain sin. Whatever the exact reason, as soon as their situation gets a little difficult, they just quit. Their first reaction to hearing God's Word seems good. The seed starts to grow, but it doesn't last.

It's important: make sure that *your* roots go deep and reach the Living Water that's inside of Jesus' heart. If you can't get to that water, you won't stand the test of "the heat of the day."

Soil number three also has soft enough dirt to receive a seed, but it has thorns, too. What happens to a good plant surrounded by weeds? It gets choked. The good plant can't get enough food from the soil because all the weeds are crowding against it.

Jesus said that the weeds stand for distractions. Some people just let their lives get too cluttered with other things. They hear the Word of God, and they like it. They *mean* to believe and obey it. They have good intentions. The Word begins to grow in their hearts, but there is just too much other stuff competing with it. It isn't that these people ignore the Word of God. They find at least *some* place for it in their hearts, and it starts to grow there. But it gets choked out when their minds get too focused on life's riches, worries, and pleasures. There's just too much worrying about paying the bills, too much focus on sports or hobbies, too many thoughts about what they're going to do and where they're going to go. All the energy and passion and thoughts get soaked up by other stuff, so the Word doesn't have room to grow. The weeds take over instead.



Of course people have responsibilities. And it's not a sin to have fun. But it's *very* important to watch your life and make sure that it is not getting too cluttered. You need to give *lots* of room to the Word of God. Give it plenty of space to grow! Make sure that you're not spending all your time and energy and focus on other stuff—even good things—or else the only really important thing will get choked out!

It's important that we keep our lives pretty simple, because our hearts can only handle so much stuff. It's even more important to keep our thoughts and emotions simple and focused on Jesus and His Word. You just don't have enough room in the garden of your heart for a thousand plants growing at once. Make sure that the Word of God is allowed to grow. Guard yourself against having a thousand things to do, a thousand things you're always thinking about, a thousand shows you want to watch or sports you want to play or fun things you want to do or stories you want to read. Make sure you've got time protected for things that are important. It's a decision only you can make, because it's not just making space in your schedule—it's making space in your thoughts!

Jesus said that three kinds of soil never produce a crop. Three kinds of hearts, in other words, don't get any lasting benefit from hearing the Word of God. Some reject it, because the Word can't penetrate their hearts any more than seeds can penetrate a hard path. Some give up, because they don't let their roots go deep enough into Jesus, just like the plants on rocky soil didn't get their roots down to the water. Those people quit, because they can't handle the pressure of criticism or temptation. Still others have a good response at first, but they forget what's important because they just get too busy with other things. Their hearts are like gardens full of weeds. The good plants just can't compete.

Ah, but there's also a *fourth* kind of soil! Jesus said that the good soil actually *does* produce a crop. The farmer harvests from the field a hundred times as much seed as fell on it to begin with. This soil stands for people who hear the Word of God and *retain* it. They look for ways to obey it. They patiently work at it. They don't just get up after reading or listening to God's Word and then go off and play, forgetting about it for the rest of the day.

You have a choice even now! Will you think about these things now and remember them off and on the rest of the day, planting them in your mind and talking to God about them regularly?

God, what do I need? What has to happen for me to have the kind of heart that's good soil? What do I have to do? I want to be good soil. Please show me some things that will help me have that kind of heart. Show me how wonderful You are. Show me how much I need You. Highlight the things in my character that are wrong, so that I will be very aware of just how much I need You. I don't want to be proud and ignore your Word. I don't want to be shallow and drift through life playing games. I want a good soil kind of heart.

Whoever you are, you aren't too young to be talking to Jesus that way and asking for help. You're deciding right now what kind of priorities you will have. What's going to be most important to you? You are either going to make room in your heart, or you're going to be hard or shallow or distracted. Those are decisions that only you can make.

The good heart hears the Word, takes hold of it, protects it, waters it, and prays over it. That's what the good soil does. Those are the only kind of people who prosper in the long term. Hearing the Word of God means nothing by itself. It's your response to God's Word that counts. Choose to be good soil!



HEAR! RETAIN! PERSEVERE!



When it comes to studying math or science, I just can't read a lesson once and have it down. I can't study it today, put it aside and forget about it, and still know the material next

week. I have to pursue the subject and look at it from different angles. I have to go back and review the material a week from now, a month from now, and a year from now. That's how I learn something and make it a permanent part of my life. I have to dig in and explore it until it becomes second nature to me.



The spiritual world is the same way. I've GOT to hear. I've GOT to retain. I've GOT to persevere in Truth in order to produce a crop that's a hundred times larger than what was sown. I've got to work the truth, run it through my fingers, and think about it. God told the Israelites to bind His Word to their foreheads and write it on the doorframes of their homes. Surely He would be pleased if I wrote it on a note, put it in my pocket, and pulled it out to review it and pray about it often. It's a foolish person who wastes the opportunity to hold on to God's precious Word!

"Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts." Be good soil!

I cannot, I *will* not, be lazy and careless with the **jewels** that God gives me and expect to grow spiritually. The truth is that I make my own future through choices that seem small—being conscious of God, getting up in the middle of the night to write something down that I've remembered, stopping everything when God is asking me to pray, or saying "I'm sorry" if I've hurt someone.

Those are crossroads and decisions that will determine MY future.

Jesus said that the road to destruction is broad and easy. Many will be on that road. If you train yourself to make sloppy choices and lazy decisions, you'll find yourself on the broad road. But it doesn't have to be that way! Jesus said that there is a narrow way that leads to Life. Because it's more challenging, few people choose that path. But you can be one of those few who declare, "I want to be soft. I want to take the road that leads towards Jesus. I want to hear, retain, and persevere in God's Word. I want to be conscious of God. I want to keep a desire for other things from crowding out His Word in my heart."

The cry of my heart will not be, "I want. I want". Instead I will ask, "What do YOU want, God?"

Those choices will determine spiritual greatness!

Those choices to be good soil will allow my heart to become a flourishing garden. Then God will be able to direct my steps and bless me as He chooses.



BE CAREFUL HOW YOU LISTEN



One of the greatest breakthroughs you can ever make in your life can come from something very simple that Jesus said: "**Be careful how you listen.**" When you hear God's Message in any form, you have a choice. You can let your mind wander, or you can really try to grab hold of every word.

Remember, Jesus talked about the good soil standing for people who *hear* and *embrace* God's Word, then *persevere* and *produce a crop*. It all begins with hearing truth and then holding onto it tightly. It requires making the effort necessary to remember truth and then finding ways to apply it. It means thinking and talking about what you want to retain. That's the difference between hearers who grow and prosper and those who wither and die spiritually.

The ones who grow up to be strong and fruitful and know Jesus in a powerful way are those who learn to be very careful how they listen. They don't just go "brain dead" and start daydreaming. They really lean into the teaching of God's Word. They want to hear it, yes. But they also want to understand it. They'll ask questions later about what they heard, because they care. They'll consider how the Word applies to them. They'll think about the difference between obedience and disobedience. They'll take note of the consequences of both. They will genuinely care. They will be **careful how they listen**.

You've learned a little bit of that lesson when your parents or other adults have asked you to do something. Whether you obeyed or disobeyed had a lot to do with how carefully you listened. Maybe you didn't really hear them say, "I want your bed made before you eat breakfast." So what did you do? You just went along in your own little world and started eating breakfast. When they discovered your bed wasn't made, you were punished—or at least you should have been! And if you thought about where things went wrong, you'd have to admit, "Well, it was because I didn't listen very carefully. I didn't really *mean* to disobey. I wasn't *trying* to disobey. I didn't decide, 'I don't care about my bed. I don't care what they say. I'm going to eat anyway.' What the adult said just slipped past me. I disobeyed because I wasn't **careful how I listened**."

The starting place for bringing pleasure to God and to others in authority is learning how to *listen* first. You have to discipline your mind. You can't let your eyes or your thoughts wander. You have to focus!

Have you ever seen a horse pulling a carriage? Usually the horse has little shades covering most of its eyes. Have you ever wondered why? They are called "blinders." They are supposed to keep the horses focused on their job! They're designed to help the horses look straight ahead rather than getting



distracted. And that's what you have to do for *yourself* in your own heart. You have to choose to focus your thoughts on what you are hearing!

This lesson applies whenever there's something important to listen to—whether it's the voice of someone in authority, an assignment that you're given for your studies, or truths from the scriptures that Jesus or the apostles taught. If something being said is important, you have to discipline your own mind. You won't see too many children wearing horse blinders on their heads! Instead, you have to make yourself pay attention, because nobody else can do it for you. You must decide that you're going to focus on what you're hearing. You have to keep yourself from getting distracted. A horse's owner sticks blinders on the *outside* of the animal's head. But *you* have to decide to stick invisible blinders on the *inside* of your own head so that you don't get distracted!

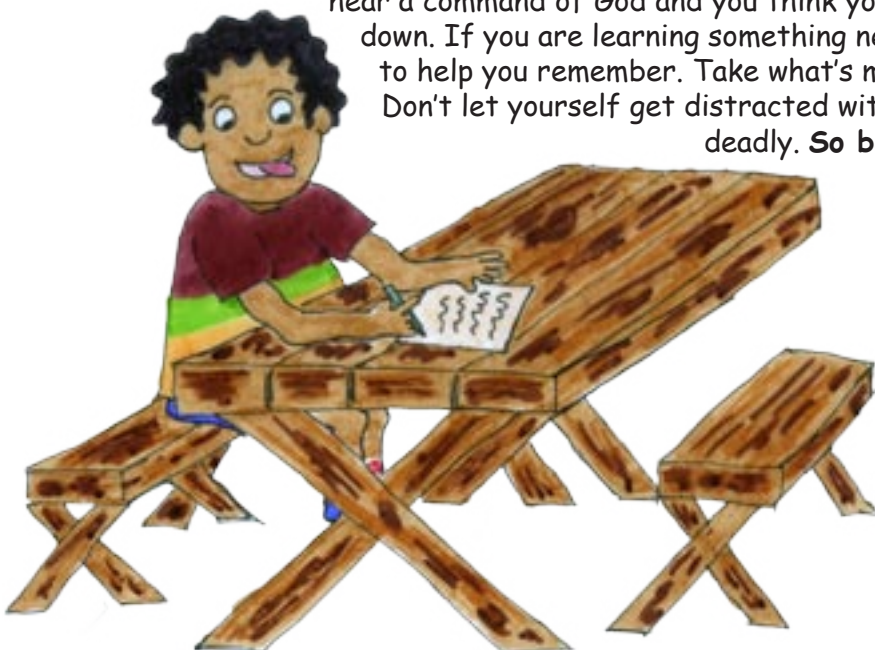
You must decide to **be very careful how you listen**. Whatever important thing that you are told, you will understand, receive, and embrace. You want it! Whatever important thing you are taught, you will find a way to put into practice. You will push distractions out of the way. You will stick with it. You will push, push, push. You will remember. You will keep moving in the right direction without looking around until this thing is done. **You will be very careful how you listen.**

So, what if you find yourself just looking around or thinking about something other than what you are hearing? What if your mind starts thinking, "Boy, I'm hungry, and it's hot in here"? What if you find yourself starting to mess around like a play-baby? You must have the self-discipline to re-focus your mind!

Unfortunately, there are lots of adults in the world who have lived their whole lives without learning how to discipline themselves. They let their thoughts float around. They give themselves the liberty of thinking about other things when they should be paying attention. They let their minds wander and don't focus. They choose to disobey Jesus! He's the one who said, "**Be very careful how you listen.**" But because they just won't obey Him in that simple matter of focusing, they end up disobeying a hundred other commands, too, because they don't hear them very well. A sloppy person will die spiritually. You don't have to turn out that way!

You can choose to put blinders on and look straight ahead. *You* can choose to be very careful how you listen, because all the other commands require focus and perseverance. You can't obey a command that you never really hear. You won't hear if you are sloppy in your thinking. You won't hold onto what you do hear if you let your mind wander.

So start there! Be disciplined in heart and mind. If you're singing, then focus on the words. If someone in authority is giving you direction, then focus on every aspect and remember it. If you hear a command of God and you think you might forget it, then write it down. If you are learning something new, then tell others and ask them to help you remember. Take what's most important and stay focused! Don't let yourself get distracted with a sloppy mind. Sloppiness is deadly. **So be very careful how you listen!**

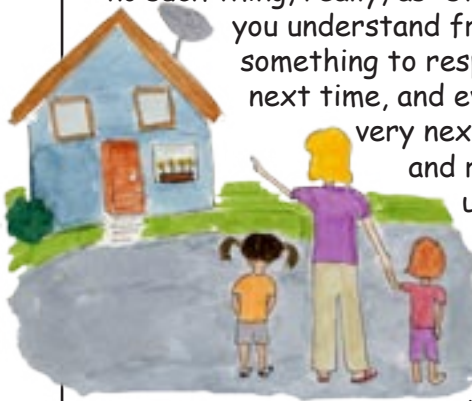


YOUR SATELLITE DISH



So be careful how you listen. Those who have understanding will be given more. But those who do not have understanding, even what they think they have will be taken away from them. (Luke 8:18)

Jesus is saying that we will either go forward with God, or we'll lose ground with Him. There is no such thing, really, as "staying the same" day after day. Here's how it works: There are things you understand from God's Word right now about how He wants you to live. If you'll do something to respond and obey with what you know now, then you'll understand more next time, and even more the time after that! You may not notice a big change the very next time you read your Bible. Still, if you're faithful with what you hear and respond to it with a whole heart the best you can, then your ability to understand increases as time goes by.



What, then, can deepen your faith in Jesus? What can enlarge your heart? *Want* to understand God's Word, and then *obey* what you understand. Your heart will grow!

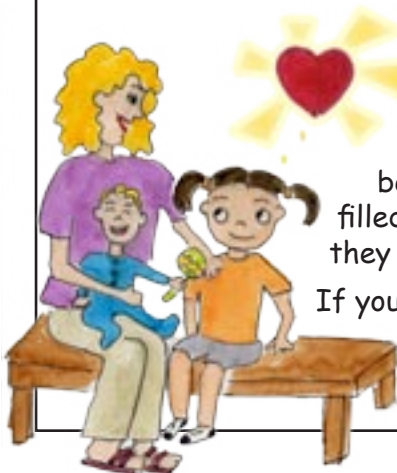
You've seen satellite dishes on people's roofs. Sometimes they're really little dishes, and sometimes they are really big. The bigger they are the better. A large satellite dish can catch more of the radio waves that are floating through the air. Listening to God is very similar. A big heart can catch more of His Word than a small heart can. You may not understand much. But if you respond to what you do hear, your heart's "satellite dish" gets bigger. Of course you get the benefit from doing whatever God asked you that time. But there's more! Your "dish" gets bigger, too, and you will have a greater ability to understand God in the future.

What happens, though, if you don't respond to the things you hear? As time passes, your "dish" will actually get smaller. There will be consequences for not obeying, of course. You will "reap what you sow" if you make a bad decision by not responding to what God asks of you. But that's not all. The next time you hear something, it won't make as much sense. You might not even catch something that you had no trouble understanding before. You weren't faithful with it the first time, so your ability to receive God's Word and apply it has diminished.

You certainly don't want your capacity to get smaller and smaller and smaller, until it finally gets to the point where your heart is hard and empty. You don't want your "dish" to shrink all the way down until God's Word has no way to get into your heart.

In the gospels we read that "the large crowd listened to Jesus with pleasure." They still had room in their hearts for His Word. The same thing was not true for the Pharisees. Jesus told them, "You have no room in your heart for My Word." Their hearts were too full of other things to receive anything new. They rejected Him and ended up crucifying Him. Why? Jesus couldn't reach their hearts. Their "satellite dishes" had shrunk down to nothing! They couldn't see how much they needed Him. Maybe when they were children, they got the best grades in their rabbi's class. It didn't do them any good, though. They filled their hearts with something else. They had heard lots of God's Word, but they were too full of themselves and had rejected His Word for too long.

If you're faithful with the things you hear, then your ability to know God increases. If you're not faithful, then your ability to even hear it next time decreases. So be careful how you listen!





HUMILITY
AND
HONESTY

PRIDE CHEATS!



Suppose a brand new friend you made
Would cheat at every game you played.
To beat you he would break a rule.
He'd even lie and trick and fool!
If you were going to kick a ball,
He'd jerk it back to make you fall.
And if he broke a window pane,
He'd run and let *you* take the blame.
What if he saw your favorite toy
And stole it? Would you let that boy
Remain your friend? The answer's no!
His cheating ways would have to go!

There is someone whose name is Pride.
He wants to come and "play" inside
Your heart and mind. He'll even act
Like he's your friend. But it's a fact:
If you let Pride into your heart,
He'll cheat you from the very start.
He'll keep you from becoming wise,
By filling up your heart with lies.
He'll take away your chance to grow
By saying you already know
The things that someone tries to teach—
And that puts wisdom out of reach!



He'll rob you of your chance for love,
Both down on earth and up above.
The folks down here will think you're rude—
They'll see your prideful attitude.
You'll never serve; you won't be kind,
For *self* will fill your heart and mind.
What's worse, you'll miss the greatest joy
For man or woman, girl or boy!
God loves the world, but only those
With humble hearts will *really* know.
The heart of God is deep and wide,
But yours will be too filled with pride!

Be careful of the "friends" you choose,
For Pride will win, and you will lose.
Oh, you will think you're tough and strong,
But at the last you'll find you're wrong.
So don't let Pride become your friend—
He'll only cheat you in the end.
Make friends with truth and love instead!
Let faith and wisdom in your head!
Humility can fill your heart,
And God will have a place to start.
Make room for Jesus deep inside;
His arms of Love are open wide!



CORRECTION AND HUMILITY



Children, obey your parents in all things, because this pleases the Lord (Colossians 3:20).

Anyone who loves learning accepts correction, but a person who hates being corrected is stupid (Proverbs 12:1).

A person who refuses correction will end up poor and disgraced, but the one who accepts correction will be honored (Proverbs 13:18).

Fools reject their parents' correction, but anyone who accepts correction is wise (Proverbs 15:5).

My son, keep your father's commands, and don't forget your mother's teaching. Keep their words in mind forever as though you had them tied around your neck. They will guide you when you walk. They will guard you when you sleep. They will speak to you when you are awake. These commands are like a lamp; this teaching is like a light. And the correction that comes from them will help you have life (Proverbs 6:20-23).

If you listen to correction to improve your life, you will live among the wise. Those who refuse correction hate themselves, but those who accept correction gain understanding. Respect for the Lord will teach you wisdom. If you want to be honored, you must be humble (Proverbs 15:31-33).

Humble yourself in the Lord's presence, and he will honor you (James 4:10).

In the same way, younger people should be willing to be under older people. And all of you should be very humble with each other. "God is against the proud, but he gives grace to the humble." Be humble under God's powerful hand so he will lift you up when the right time comes (1 Peter 5:5-6).

God lives forever and is holy. He is high and lifted up. He says, "I live in a high and holy place, but I also live with people who are sad and humble. I give new life to those who are humble and to those whose hearts are broken" (Isaiah 57:15).

"My hand made all things. All things are here because I made them," says the Lord. "These are the people I am pleased with: those who are not proud or stubborn and who fear my word" (Isaiah 66:2).



OPEN UP ROOM FOR JESUS



Imagine yourself exploring an old house. You come to an unusual room. From the size of the house, you're sure there must be something else beyond the room, but you can't see any doors. Could there be any hidden ones? You run your hands along the walls until you feel a little crack running up and down one of them. You push, and it gives just a little. So you push a little harder, and this time a secret door swings open! Now you have a whole new passageway to explore!

Our hearts can be like that room. Often we aren't really aware of why we think the things we think or do the things we do. It's because we haven't taken the time or made the effort to examine ourselves. But if we look for them, we can find "cracks" in the walls of our hearts and minds. We can push on the "cracks" to see if they open some part of us that has been hidden inside. Not everyone is willing to quiet the noise around them—and inside them—so they can examine their hearts. But it is how we can become much more real in our relationship with Jesus.

So what can you and I do? Well, one important thing is to look back on our day and consider how it went. Here are some questions I can ask myself that just might open up a "crack" in my heart:



- Did I genuinely care about other people today? Did I notice if someone seemed especially quiet, happy, sad, or loud?
- Was I all wrapped up in things today that don't really have much value?
- What was most on my heart and mind today?
- Today, did I try to honor God? Did I do my best to please Him?
- What about the thoughts I had today—were they pure? Did I waste energy wanting something that it wasn't right to have? Did I harbor anger, resentment, or self-pity? Did I linger on any thoughts that were selfish, defensive, or prideful?
- Did I go back and talk to God about ways that I disappointed Him? Did I tell Him I was sorry?

If you go to bed at night and give no thought to your day, then you will stay shallow. Talking to God about your thoughts, motives, and actions is what will help you go deeper.

If you resist the devil, he will flee. It follows, then, that if you ignore the devil, he'll come back and do the same thing tomorrow that he did today. And he'll try to do even more next time!

So push on the cracks in your heart. Open up new rooms for Jesus to move into!

HOW CAN YOU LOVE TRUTH?



They could be saved, but they will refuse to love the truth and accept it...All of them will be punished, because they would rather do evil than believe the truth. (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11)

It sounds like a pretty important thing to love the truth! How can you do that?

You can start by being humble and receiving truth from other people whenever they speak to you about something in your life. A lot of times for a child, that will take the form of receiving correction from a parent. But it could also come from another adult who knows you. It could even come from another child who is concerned about something they saw you do or heard you say that they know just isn't right. It can be hard to "love the truth" in that situation! But if you want to be saved, it's crucial to love truth, even when it hurts. That means being humble enough to receive things from other people when they want to talk to you about sin or about your need for a Savior.

You can also take it a step further! Don't wait for someone to come to you with correction.

Voluntarily tell your parents—or another Christian that you trust—about sin in your life, even if they haven't seen it. Be REAL! Don't present a false picture of who you REALLY are. It doesn't make a lot of sense to *act* like you are sailing through life without any problems if it isn't true. Does someone even need to be saved if they are not lost? It's so much better just to be honest and truthful with people who care and who know how to help.

Another important part of loving truth is something we've already talked a lot about—*listening*. Whatever the truth you are learning, make a habit of careful listening. Hold onto truth and DO something about it. James certainly put it clearly:

Do what God's teaching says; when you only listen and do nothing, you are fooling yourselves. Those who hear God's teaching and do nothing are like people who look at themselves in a mirror. They see their faces and then go away and quickly forget what they looked like. But the truly happy people are those who carefully study God's perfect law that makes people free, and they continue to study it. They do not forget what they heard, but they obey what God's teaching says. Those who do this will be made happy. (James 1:22-25).

Do you want to love the truth? Cultivate an attitude in your heart of *caring* about it. Be humble and teachable and then DO something with what you are taught. Everyone who finds and stays close to Jesus has that attitude.


God notices when you love truth! He will come near and become more real to you. If you take little baby steps toward God, He will take ten giant steps toward you. God is searching for YOU. He wants YOU. He wants YOUR heart. God is looking at your heart, saying, "If you will just move toward Me because you want to know Me, then I'll run towards you!" He IS just that faithful! He's



just that good! There are actually only a few people on the face of this earth who truly CARE. "The Lord searches all the earth for people who have given themselves completely to him. He wants to make them strong" (2 Chronicles 16:9). You can be one of those few!

So CHOOSE to FEED on TRUTH. Take the place of someone who doesn't know it all and doesn't have it all together. Don't just read God's Word. Cry out to JESUS! Tell Him you need Him. Tell Him you want to know and love His truth. He will hear you!





Can
you hear His gentle
overtures of Love calling
you? • From the furthest reaches of
eternity • Before time began • Jesus was
with the Father • Existing in Perfect
Harmony with Him • Then He CAME! • Bringing
within Himself the perfect expression of His
Father • He came because the Father longed to let
people know who He is • To Let you know who He is
• What He is like • But more than all that... • He
Came to Transform YOU! • So that you could hear
Him and See Him • So that together with God's
Family • You could be so infused with Life and
Light • That you might actually become a
CHILD OF GOD! • Can you IMAGINE IT?
**He's Wilder than your
wildest dreams!**

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