

THE GREAT CHALLENGE

Living a Love That Reconciles

RYAN NUNEZ


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Introduction

One of the things that unites all human beings is our need and desire for authentic relationship. The specific number of relationships one desires is a factor of one's personality. For some people crowds wear them out. After being in a group of people for a given length of time, their energy is depleted and can only be recharged by being away from others for a time. And then there are some people whose energy increases with every person who walks into the room.

But regardless of personality type, everyone has a fundamental need to be in relationships with others.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Relationships are hard. Actually, let me say that a different way: authentic relationships are hard. An authentic relationship takes a lot of work. It means being genuine and vulnerable, which builds trust over time. Authentic relationships require a lot of maintenance. Conflicts and disagreements need to be addressed and worked through. There are misunderstandings and sometimes there is outright betrayal.

Sometimes our relationships become so damaged we are tempted to just toss them out instead of fixing them. In some instances we are hurt so badly we believe that life would be easier without other people—that is, until it happens and we find ourselves alone. At first it might feel like carefree living. There is relief in not worrying about someone else all the time, but then the isolation sets in. When we do not have authentic relationships, the loneliness that can come even in a crowded room is unbearable.

This is not a modern phenomenon. This is a universal human condition. Across cultures and times, the need to be connected with others is ever present.

The Bible opens with an account of the first man, named Adam. God creates him and places him in a beautiful garden. He is shown love by God and given a purpose in life: he is to tend the garden and care for the creation God has placed around him. Within a very short period of time a phrase in the narrative sticks out like a sore thumb: “it is not good.” The reason this is so out of place is that the introduction to this narrative about Adam is an ancient Hebrew poem describing God’s creative acts. Ancient Hebrew poetry has a rhythm set out by repeating phrases. (This is different than our modern poetry or songs, whose rhythm is typically established by words that rhyme.) The repeating phrase of the poem is, “it was good.” So, after hearing over and over again that everything is good, we get a “not good.” And this “not good” statement happens sooner than you might think. If you have heard the account from Genesis, you know about the serpent and the forbidden fruit, the fall of mankind. But this “not good” is even before that. Do you know what is “not good”?

“It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper who is just right for him” (Genesis 2:18).

We were literally created to be in relationship with others.

That’s why it pains us so much to be alone.

That’s why it hurts so much when relationships struggle.

William Shakespeare captures this sentiment in his play *Julius Caesar*. As Caesar is being assassinated by a group of senators, Shakespeare places in his mouth the famous line: “Et tu, Brute!” Meaning, “And you, Brutus!” He is literally being murdered, but the most traumatic part of his death is the discovery that his friend Brutus conspired against him.

We are really good at sabotaging the life-giving relationships we need. We do it through feelings of privilege,

selfishness, bias, fear, and anger, to name a few. When these things find their way into our relationships the natural consequence is division.

How do we find and maintain the authentic relationships we both desire and need? The answer is not new. In fact, it is ancient. As much as we feel like the human experience has changed over time, at its core it's still the same: the same challenges, just in different packaging, the same needs, just expressed differently. The answer is found in Jesus' command to love one another.

Jesus of Nazareth is one of the most controversial figures in all of history. Countless people have been killed in his name, some for believing in him and others for choosing not to believe. He has been loved and hated. He has been followed with great devotion and has been criticized as a deceiver.

The conflict does not center around whether or not he actually existed. Historians settled that issue long ago. The battle surrounds his identity. Was he a prophet, teacher, Son of God, Messiah, Savior, or King? Some people believe he was some or all of those things.

I have my own personal convictions about Jesus.

I believe that he is God the Son, God in the flesh, one Person of the Trinity, co-equal with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

I believe that he gave up his life as a sacrifice to atone for mankind's rebellion against a loving God.

I believe that the only way to be right with God is through the forgiveness of sin made available by Jesus' sacrifice.

I believe that forgiveness, this grace that God offers, is completely unmerited and undeserved by our actions.

I didn't write this book to share my personal beliefs and convictions about who Jesus was or is. But I also don't want to be disingenuous about where I stand. Whether or not you share these beliefs, I think this book is for you. More specifically, I believe the challenges contained in this book are for you.

You see, despite all the discussion over the identity of Jesus, no one really argues with the teachings of Jesus. Seriously, in all my years as a pastor, I have never had anyone tell me they disagreed with the actual teachings of Jesus. Sure, some people disagree with some of the things they *think* he said. Or they might disagree with some of the things they *heard others claim* Jesus said. But when push comes to shove and we look at the actual firsthand accounts of his teaching and ministry, I have yet to have someone say that living and acting the way he taught is a bad idea.

"So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other," Jesus said (John 13:34).

Where is the controversy in that statement?

Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, three other major world religions, all esteem Jesus of Nazareth as a wise teacher.

Whether you approach Jesus Christ with curiosity and skepticism or with conviction, as your Savior, I believe you will benefit from this book.

Living out Jesus' command to love one another has the potential to dramatically impact your life. I am not talking about a feelings-based or emotional love here . . . and neither was Jesus. We are talking about an action-based love. A radical love that stretches the bounds of comfort and rational thinking. It's the kind of love that has the ability to change not only the relationships in your life but also the world itself.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

We are going to take a look at five specific ways (in chapters 2 through 6) that Jesus instructs his followers to love. I am going to challenge you to try each one out, to put it into practice and see what happens. In each challenge we will break down a natural barrier in our life with an unnatural—or rather, supernatural—act of love. Over the course of the journey we will see what happens to the people you love and what happens to you in the process. In the last chapter we will catch a glimpse of what could happen if enough people choose to live out these challenges consistently.

You can read this book on your own and I believe it will be impactful. I also believe that if you read it with a group of friends, it has the power to be life-changing. I would encourage you to read a chapter each week and then meet together as a group to share how you are doing on the challenge, to learn from the experiences of others, and to encourage one another.

I am excited for you! I believe that living out the challenges of Jesus will be life-altering. If you take these challenges seriously each week, I believe it will be impossible not to experience the Jesus that I know.

Blessings,
Ryan Nunez

Chapter 1

The Command to Love

I invite you to participate in a Great Challenge.

There are a lot of them out there. It seems like people come up with more each day. Summiting Mt. Everest used to be the pinnacle of mountain climbing, but now it is climbing the highest peak on each continent. The Grand Canyon hike used to be a pretty big deal too, but just recently I had a friend do the rim-to-rim-to-rim challenge: he went down the canyon, up the other side, back down and up to his original starting point. Don't even get me started about running! I am a runner and have run a few marathons (26.2 miles, and don't forget the 0.2!), but now there are 50- and 100-mile trail runs.

Then there are the food challenges: eating super-hot ghost peppers without anything to drink, eating an entire 72 oz. steak in under an hour, and my kids' favorite: eating nasty-flavored jellybeans.

I have even seen a "husband does my makeup" challenge on YouTube where a woman allowed her husband to do her makeup and then posted a picture of the aftermath. She challenged others to do the same and share pictures as well.

Everyone loves a good challenge.

What if I told you that this challenge I am inviting you to take is 2,000 years old—and hasn't changed at all during that time? It hasn't been escalated. It hasn't become outdated. It is just as challenging today as it was when it was

first given. Plus, you don't have to be in great physical shape or have a stomach of steel to do it.

And as an added bonus . . . I believe this challenge will change your life and the lives of those around you.

Let me tell you how I came to discover this Great Challenge.

I get great satisfaction in connecting dots. When I was young, this manifested itself in a significant amount of time spent with activity books, literally connecting the dots on paper. I loved those sheets, especially the ones where you had no idea what picture the dots were going to make until the very end.

I carried this passion for connecting the dots with me into adulthood. I enjoy seeing how things are related. Seeing the cause and effect of everything around us and discovering the underlying principles gives me that same satisfaction I experienced as a child.

That was probably one of the motivations behind my initial pursuit of a career in science. That *is* what being a scientist is all about, right?

In my academic career, I never discovered a natural law and I certainly didn't make any progress on a unified theory of everything. My contributions to science lie in a distant corner of Hayden Library at Arizona State University, where my dissertation is shelved. Four and a half years of graduate school and I was able to connect two dots in the field of material science. For that they gave me a Ph.D.!

That was a long time ago, and since then I have entered full-time ministry as a pastor. I've added a few seminary classes to my educational resume, and I have applied my love of connecting the dots to the faith I hold so dearly.

I make it a personal goal to read through the Bible every year. Some years I have a specific theme or study topic

in mind. Other years I don't. As I was reading through the New Testament last year, I was trying to look at it through the eyes of someone who was skeptical about the whole thing. I intentionally tried to take off all the lenses I had acquired over the years that influence the way I read the Bible. I was attempting to get to the core of what the Scriptures were asking me to do—super practical stuff, the things checklists are made of.

Now please understand me: I do not believe authentically following Jesus can be reduced to a checklist. God desires a relationship with his children, not a transaction, but during this year's reading I was searching for a pattern.

Now, you might be a quicker study than I am. I like to connect the dots, but I never said I was very fast at it. It took me to the end of John's Gospel, the fourth book in the New Testament, to pick up on the pattern. I found it in Jesus' discussion with and prayer for his disciples the night before he was crucified:

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples. (John 13:34–35)

This is the key to the pattern, where Jesus issues our Great Challenge. In that one statement Jesus says so much. It's a turning point. Here are four major observations.

1. This command is different than his previous commands.
2. He tells us how to love each other.
3. Jesus sets the example.
4. Our love is the evidence that we are his disciples.