



Bob Merritt

7

**SIMPLE
CHOICES**
FOR A **BETTER**
TOMORROW

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BOB MERRIT

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For Laurie
my best friend

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Foreword

Life is difficult for everybody. There are hard jobs, hard marriages, and hard family dynamics. But some people compound their problems by ignoring basic principles that can help them get where they want to go in life.

Where along the way did we forget that discipline is our friend? It's not always going to feel like an ally, but later when you have to rely on a skill you've honed by discipline, you learn that it served you well.

The seven simple choices that Pastor Bob Merritt talks about in *7 Simple Choices for a Better Tomorrow* won't make life less difficult, but they may just lead to accomplishment, freedom, and ease. Not *easy* but ease in navigating through life's daily challenges.

Some people really do get from here to there with their lives, marriages, friendships, and jobs intact.

The principles found within *7 Simple Choices for a Better Tomorrow* are grounded within the fabric of how God set the world in motion and how he intended for us to live within it.

They also flow out of the life of one of the most adventurous and respected church leaders in the country.

I've known Bob for many years. He is in the top 1 percent of the finest pastors on the planet. He is a man whose mission has always been to see lives transformed by the power of Christ. Even after leading a church from 350 to 13,000, his heart still aches for people who are far from God. When people from Willow are transferred to Minneapolis, we send them Bob's way.

You have someone in your life who needs this book—a son, daughter, parent, or friend. *7 Simple Choices for a Better Tomorrow* contains the simple everyday choices that will lead to lifelong freedom and achievement, even for those of us who have made a mess of things along the way. It's never too late to try life God's way, so why not start now.

Bill Hybels

senior pastor, Willow Creek Community Church;
chairman of the board, Willow Creek Association

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Everything I have comes from the hand of God. And so it's to him that I owe my eternal thanks for pouring the contents of this book into my heart and mind. He is the real author.

And for reasons I'll never understand, God has allowed me to lead an amazing church made up of people who, for the past nineteen years, have put up with my blunders and weaknesses but who still choose to love me.

Eagle Brook is such a part of my identity that I would be lost and grieved without it. I can't thank the people of this church enough for the love and patience that you've shown me for nearly two decades. These have been the most thrilling years of my life.

I am grateful to our board, whose wisdom I cherish and support I need. Thank you for the value you placed on this project by giving me time to write.

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To my two children, Megan and David-every single day I thank God for the gift that you are to me. I will never understand the depth of God's goodness to your mom and me when he made the four of us a family. You alone have made our lives worth living.

Finally, my deepest devotion and gratitude goes to my best friend for more than thirty-eight years. It's to you, Laur, that I dedicate this book. God has used you to shape my life to become a better man. Thank you for believing in me, challenging me, and sharing your soul with me. I'm still shocked that I got the girl sitting by the window in tenth-grade history class. I know that you're still a little shocked too.

Introduction

Several weeks ago I was sitting under a huge maple tree that canopied over my in-laws' back deck in western Pennsylvania. I needed to go over some notes I'd written, I put on my glasses, picked up my pen and papers, lifted my feet up on the footstool, and, without warning, the deck chair shattered and instantly collapsed. Have you ever had this happen? You have complete trust, you lean back, and all of a sudden, wham, the bottom drops out.

My arms went flailing, my glasses flew off, I tumbled backward off the deck two steps down, and landed on my butt in their coiled-up garden hose-it all happened in half a second. I had a gash on my right elbow, my thumb hurt, and my left rear was sore. And I didn't bounce right back up and shake it off; I rolled over on my hands and knees, located my glasses, gathered my papers, and then stood to my feet like an overdue pregnant woman.

But now I had a different problem: there used to be four matching deck chairs; now there were three. What do you do when you've completely destroyed your father-in-law's deck chair? Well, you hide it in the garage behind the lawn mower and hope he won't notice until you're gone, which is what I did. When I told my wife about it, she said, "Don't you think he'll notice that they one had four and now they only have three?" "Yes," I said. "But I'm afraid to tell him."

What made it worse is that I have a history of breaking things at my in-laws' house. I broke an end table when I knocked it over rounding a corner; I once broke off a faucet handle while brushing my teeth; and I know I broke his heart when I married his daughter and moved her a thousand miles away to Minnesota. I just didn't want to face the embarrassment and humiliation. So I hid the chair behind the lawnmower and flew home the next day. Two days later when Laurie told her dad what happened he said, "Oh, one of our neighbors broke that chair three weeks ago and I just tried to glue it together. Tell Bob I'm terribly sorry. That chair shouldn't have been out there in the first place."

Nuts. I could've been a stand-up son-in-law, confessed what I'd done, and received all kinds of sympathy. Instead I tried to cover it up and weasel out.

But this is life. Things break, accidents happen, and people make mistakes. Just this morning at the crack of dawn our dog barfed all over our living room floor. I fumbled out of bed, grabbed some cleaner from under the sink, and ended up bleaching the

color out of our carpet in three big spots. I never knew that if it's not carpet cleaner, you can ruin your carpet. Now I know.

But deck chairs and carpets can be replaced. It's different when someone's dream collapses, or someone's heart gets broken, or someone's friendship or career gets ruined. But this also is life-things break, accidents happen, and people make mistakes. No one is exempt, and no amount of education, money, or even faith can shield us completely.

But some people are able to regroup and recover from life's losses while others seem to spiral downward. Some people seem to have a deep reservoir of faith, character, goodwill, and healthy relationships that they're able to draw upon when times get tough. It's like having a savings account that gets them

through an economic downturn. Economic downturns, just like emotional and relational downturns, are inevitable; those who survive them draw upon the reservoir of strength that they built up when times were good.

Those who struggle the most have little or no reservoir because of choices made along the way that put them in debt, formed addictions, cut short their education, hurt their relationships, and distanced them from God. So when their chair collapses, they have little or nothing from which to draw.

I hear it every week from people who look back on the careless choices they made. "I wish I could go back and relive those years," people will tell me. "Those choices continue to handicap my life."

But the good news is, there is good news. God can, and will, restore us and put us on a new path through his grace and forgiveness. But we have to do our part, which is why I wrote *7 Simple Choices for a Better Tomorrow*.

Some people really do have healthy marriages, friendships, and careers, and every one of them has applied the seven simple choices that I've outlined in this book. These choices are woven into the fabric of how God has put the world together, and they're available to every human being-and they're doable.

In part 1 I look at the two options that all of us face in life the hard life or or the harder life. The seven simple choices don't seem simple or easy and in reality they aren't. But they are essential if we hope to prevent a hard life from becoming harder. And because life pretty much comes down to the people in it, part 1 shows why our choices must be fused to relationships.

Part 2 is the stuff of everyday life. Every balanced, grounded, thriving, and joy-filled person I know understands and lives by these seven choices. If life's not working, it's never too late to start on a new path. Let these choices, and God's wisdom, guide your way.

And because none of us get life right all of the time (Romans 3:23 tells us that "all have sinned and fall short"), part 3 is written to bring healing and hope. None of us are beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness. Part 3 outlines the process of restoration that's available to all of us. I've waited twenty-five years to write about the heart-filled surprises that await the reader in part 3.

Life is hard enough; don't make it harder by ignoring the seven simple choices that God has put before each one of us. If life's not working as well as you had hoped, take charge of your life, get on a different path, and watch how God puts the pieces back together.

PART 1

Foundations for a Great Tomorrow

1

Free Fall

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to jump out of a plane. I've watched people do it on TV and thought, "Someday I'm going to do that..." when I'm older, when I've exceeded my life expectancy, like George Bush Sr., who did his first dive at eighty. When you're eighty, you don't have to worry about your kids' education or your retirement fund; you're good to go. I'm not a big risk taker, and I don't like heights, but when I mentioned it from the pulpit one day, one of my parishioners decided to hold me to it and bought me a \$125 ticket for a tandem dive.

Now I was committed.

It's one thing to talk about something like that; it feels completely irresponsible to actually make the reservation and surrender your life to a knapsack at thirteen thousand feet.

The day finally came, and three other guys from our church joined me. We checked our life insurance policies, kissed our wives good-bye, and drove over to Twin Cities Skydive in Baldwin, Wisconsin. It was supposed to be fun, but it felt more like something we just had to get through so we wouldn't be labeled the biggest sissies ever.

After an hour-long training session and signing our names to twenty-five pages of liability release forms, the instructor walked us past the staging area where a bunch of college kids were folding chutes. All four of us stopped, looked at the ragtag group of kids who were barely out of high school, and asked, "How long have you guys been working here?" One kid said a couple years, another said two months, another said a few weeks. So the only thing separating us from life and death was a well-worn chute packed by an inexperienced college kid who was making eight dollars an hour. Not a comforting thought. "Has one of these chutes ever failed?" I wondered out loud. A kid with about eight piercings through his nose and ears responded, "Yeah, but that's why there's a second chute." None of us had the guts to ask if the second chute had ever failed.

By now our nerves were sufficiently shot, but then we met our pilot-Rabbit. Rabbit had a long ponytail and wore a tank top, cutoffs, and no shoes; evidently FAA regulations didn't apply. As he climbed into the cockpit we heard Rabbit say, "I hope I get it right

this time."

My friends and I were doing a tandem jump, which means you're strapped to the chest of a "professional." I had Joe, an excitable thirty-year-old with ADD and a love for beer, who said to me before we jumped, "If the chute don't open, the last thing to go through your mind will be my skull." Then he added, "I've only had to use my second emergency chute eight times." Professional skydivers are a rare breed who keep their clients off balance with a mix of sick humor and steely eyed threats, because it's their life too, which is your only source of comfort.

There were nine other jumpers on the plane. We climbed to about ten thousand feet, and suddenly Joe got real serious. He went through the final instructions; double-checked the chute, straps, and altimeter on his wrist; cinched me in tightly to his waist and chest; and said with a loud, stern voice, "Do not pull on anything!" We climbed to thirteen thousand feet. The tension was building. My three friends gave me a nervous look. Then somebody shoved open the door, and it was game on!

The cold air hit us, and we watched the first guy disappear solo out the door and shoot like a bullet toward earth. I felt nauseous. I watched the second guy do the same, then a third. Person after person hurled himself out the door. I thought I might hurl.

My friend Dean and I were the last to go. Dean is a forty-year-old executive at a Minneapolis software company and the father of three young girls. Watching Dean slide toward the door, give a final thumbs up, and fall toward the earth upside down was the freakiest thing I've ever seen. The speed at which he fell made him look like a tiny speck within seconds.

But now it was my turn. Joe and I slid toward the door; the wind and the engine noise were deafening. We squatted down. I felt like I was insane, and my mind couldn't process what was happening. But we were warned not to fight it. Skydiving demands 100 percent commitment, so I surrendered myself, leaned forward, and at the count of three, Joe and I jumped.

The first ten seconds were the most intense, most surreal feeling I've ever had. I flipped over headfirst and then was upside down. I felt completely out of control and detached from anything stable. They call it a "free fall," and that's exactly what it is. You're just out there, and the g-force hits your body immediately. Then Joe turned me over, the wind ripped at my face, and I could see the earth coming toward me at 120 mph. We were in a free fall for a full minute, just screaming toward the earth, and you realize that if your chute doesn't open, it'll be over in less than three minutes. I saw Joe check

his altimeter, then check it again, and then he hit me on the shoulder, signaling that he was about to pull the rip cord. The critical moment had come. I grabbed my harness and felt a sudden jerk. The chute opened, and we were thrust two hundred feet upward. I realized we were going to live. The rest was an easy glide down.

People have asked me if it was fun and if I'd do it again. It wasn't, and I wouldn't. But I did learn some things: when you're plunging toward the earth with nothing but a backpack and a rip cord, there's no room for error. And you pray that whoever packed your chute did it with precision and that the "professional" on your back didn't go through a bad breakup with his girlfriend the night before. In fact, the most comforting words Joe said to me before we jumped were, "If you touch anything I will punch you in the back of the head. There's only one way to do this or we die." I was genuinely relieved to know that Joe was a "one way only" kind of guy. I learned that Joe was the way, the truth, and the life up there, and it wasn't up for debate. There wasn't a second way or a third way. There was only one way, and Joe was it. I learned that my jump with Joe was his 1,822nd successful jump. Clearly, he'd never had an unsuccessful one, and he made sure of it. I learned that Joe lives by and submits to a proven set of disciplines that ensure his safety every time he jumps. His life depends on it. And there's no deviation, no alternative, no other way. *There's only one way to do this or we die.*

Life's Disciplines

This is a book on life's disciplines-on self-management, on doing the right stuff in the right order. A life discipline is something you practice over and over again until it becomes ingrained in you, and there's no deviation, because you know that your life depends on it. *There's only one way to do this.* It's different from a principle, which is more theoretical in nature. It's different from a habit, because habits can be good or bad and are often short-lived. A discipline is a behaviour, a practice, a way of living that you build into your life so that it becomes a way of life.

God structured the world in such a way that how the world works is predictable and consistent. We don't have to guess about cause and effect because in the Bible God made it clear how he wants us to live and what the natural outcomes will be if we live that way or we don't. He does this out of love. If we choose to live in alignment with how God has structured the world, our lives will work well. But if we live in opposition to how God has structured the world, our lives won't work well and we will end up suffering all kinds of hurtful consequences.

This earth is not heaven, however, and even the most disciplined, most godly people are not immune to illnesses, accidents, and losses associated with a broken, sinful world.

A perfectly disciplined life doesn't guarantee a pain-free life. But a person who consistently does the right things in the right order will avoid the unnecessary losses and setbacks that plague those who do the wrong things in the wrong order.

When it comes to skydiving, for example, my friend Joe can count on the consistency of gravity, physics, and wind speed. And if the teenager who packed the chute did it right, Joe will have a safe jump every time. Joe can bet his life on the consistency with which God structured the world, and because of that, he's up to 1,822 jumps and counting.

The same is true for things like marriage, raising children, leading an organization, and staying physically and financially fit. God's ways are consistent for every culture and for all time. He's given us a set of universal disciplines that are the building blocks to making life work and achieving the best possible outcomes.

A discipline can be learned, but it must be practiced, and it becomes an actual life discipline only when it becomes your natural, automatic response to any and all situations. Disciplines come more naturally to some people than others depending on their upbringing, education, role models, personality, and experience. Today, I am by nature a disciplined person, but it came by watching my father, who was disciplined; he did the right things in the right order, and I reaped the benefits of his consistent life. I never had to guess about his morality, his marriage to my mom, or his commitment to his work or family. I stood on solid ground, and I wanted that for me and my family. These life disciplines work for young and old, male and female, wealthy and poor, religious and nonreligious. Some disciplines are easier to learn and live by than others, and some are counterintuitive, which means they sometimes don't make immediate sense.

The first sentence of Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled* is a timeless truth: "Life is difficult." [1] Life is difficult because it consists of a series of problems that need to be solved. But then he says, "Discipline is the basic set of tools we require to solve life's problems. Without discipline we can solve nothing. With only some discipline we can solve only some problems. With total discipline we can solve all problems." [2]

Peck says that discipline is the key to solving life's problems and that without it we can't solve anything. I think he's dead-on. Living by a set of God-ordained disciplines is the only right way to live and the most liberating way to live. They are the foundational structures in life that produce benefits like achievement instead of failure, reward instead of regret, freedom instead of bondage, intimacy instead of loneliness, wholeness instead of brokenness, financial independence instead of indebtedness. It simply is not possible to achieve personal and professional wellness without living by

the principles of discipline that God has put in place for all time and for all occasions. Disciplines are not superimposed punishments. Disciplines are self-imposed practices that you apply to yourself willingly, because you have discovered that without them you fail. Peck says, "Without discipline we can solve nothing."

Two Choices

In Matthew 5-7, Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, which is the essence of what Jesus wanted us to know about life. Boil it all down, and these three chapters contain the most penetrating words in the entire Old and New Testaments. In that sermon, Jesus tackled the most sensitive topics: murder, adultery, divorce, anger, worry, judging others, and the way to salvation. And he didn't sugarcoat them. Matthew recorded, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matt. 7:28-29).

But then Jesus warned his listeners of two roads: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus says there are two ways to live life. Not one way, not three ways, but two. The choice that every human being has to make is between a broad road and a narrow road, a careless road and a disciplined road. And you can't combine the two. You can't straddle the fence. The Bible says that we have to choose between one of these two roads.

Choice one is the broad road. It's there, and it's available. Jesus describes what the broad road is like: it has no boundaries or restraints, so you don't have to aim at it in order to hit it. It requires no disciplines. It has no list of do's and don'ts, no alarm clocks, no deadlines, no curfews, no responsibilities. It has a broad morality: immorality. It has a broad truth: no truth. And it has a broad freedom, which is actually a false freedom, because it results in breakups, breaches of trust, and bondage.

Many people today suggest that life should not be burdened by disciplines and restrictions. Those things feel constraining, and so they choose the broad road. They also choose the broad road because it is popular. It's not lonely on the broad road. Jesus says that *many* are on this road; you'll have a lot of company if you choose this road because many are traveling it. But Jesus also says that the broad road leads somewhere. Every road has a destination, and the broad road leads to destruction. And he's not just talking about eternal destruction as in an eternal hell someday. He's talking about destruction in all its forms—in relationships, families, careers, and personal health. Jesus says you cannot travel the broad road without its leading to destruction,

because there are negative consequences for those who travel this road.

But then Jesus says there's another road, another option, and you and I must intentionally choose to follow it. At first glance, this other road appears to have some disadvantages, because it has restrictions and boundaries. There are certain things you must and must not do. For example, you have to be careful where you walk, how you walk, and with whom you walk, because the Bible says that this is a narrow road. You have to aim at it and be careful when you're on it. To quote my skydiving friend, "There's only one way to do this or we die." That's a narrow road. It has restrictions, warnings, and dangers. But some of the best roads I've ever been on were extremely narrow.

A few years ago, my wife, Laurie, and I were on a narrow road in Maui that made us both sweat. I gripped the steering wheel with both hands and heard her say, "Why do I let you talk me into these things?" There were blind curves with rock walls going straight up on one side and five-hundred-foot cliffs that dropped straight down to the sea on the other. And there were no guardrails. I noticed several makeshift shrines with wooden crosses and plastic flowers where people had tragically wandered off the narrow road. But the off-road hikes we took that day led us to cascading waterfalls, magnificent views, and ocean blowholes that are seared into our memory.

So first, this road is narrow, which makes it tough to follow. But Jesus says that what's even more difficult is that "there's only a few who travel it." It can be lonely on the narrow road, and that's hard. When it seems like you're the only one in your school who's trying to live a clean life, that's hard. When you're the only one in your family who goes to church, that's hard. When you're the only one in your work group who doesn't use foul language, that's hard. When you're the only one in your dormitory who's made a commitment to sexual purity, that can be hard and lonely.

But look where the narrow road leads to life. Jesus says that while the broad road leads to destruction, the narrow road leads to life. And he's not just referring to some distant eternal life in heaven. It is life for the here and now, in all its forms. Jesus says, "I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). Jesus wants us to have a full life on earth, filled with family, love, great friends, meaningful careers, financial stability, purposeful contributions to society, and an intimate relationship with God. And all that is possible. Some people really do have "life to the full" in this present life. It's not that they don't have problems or deep losses-nobody's immune to those things-but there's a fullness and joy about them that comes from a life that's well acquainted with the narrow road.

The High Cost of Low Living

Newsweek has a weekly section called My Turn, where aver-age people submit a slice of their life for publication. Several years ago I read the story of Judy Edelson, a forty-five-year-old woman who wrote about her experience on the broad road. She titled the article "Not All Bridges Can Be Burned":

When I was younger, I thought my past didn't mean anything. I thought things left undone, things said in haste, niceties ig-nored and laws broken weren't important.... I used to laugh at my mother telling me, "That will go on your permanent record." I thought I had no permanent record. I was young and had a long, full lifetime in which to make mistakes and explore endless possibilities. I meandered around with drugs, played the hippie. (I won't tell you how many times I've been married, but it is more than the prerequisite American num-ber of two.) Never was there a moment's concern about the possibility of these events coming back to haunt me later, because there was no later. Just now.

One day I looked around and I was 40. The next day I was 45. I look ahead and I can see 50. Today I have a daughter of my own and I find myself weary of telling her about the dangers of foolish living based on my personal experience. Sometimes I hold my breath when I have to put down a name on a reference list, worrying what that person may know about me. May think about me. May say about me. That comes from foolish living. I used to have the attitude that I didn't care what other people thought about me it was my life and I was going to live it.

I would like to add some upbeat comment that says, "Oh, well, it was all worth it." But it wasn't worth it. I have so much waste in my past it almost washes away my future. It's like reaching your hand into a big bag knowing there are gems in it but that there's a lot of slimy stuff you would rather not touch. There is a permanent record. It lives on in the memories of all the people you've come in contact with. It lives on in your own perceptions of yourself, coloring and flavoring who you become, what you expect to be able to accomplish and how you live your life.

Everywhere I turn my past keeps coming up in polite con-versations, job applications and "Mommy, what did you do during the war?" Which is what my precious angel asked me one day. I honestly replied, "Oh honey, I got stoned and missed the war." Then I had to explain to her that I didn't mean people threw rocks at me, but that I lived my life in a slow stupor, wore sandals and see-through shirts, and talked at great length, with utter conviction, about things of which I knew absolutely nothing.

A consequence of foolish living is having to choose my words carefully. Being cautious not to reveal embarrassing elements of my past. Conversations about my college years are restricted to courses of study. Ex-husbands have been transformed into "a friend I

used to have" or "an old boy-friend of mine." I don't want my daughter to think that get-ting married and divorced is no big deal. I don't want her to make the same mistakes and experience the heartache that accompanies an off-the-cuff lifestyle.

So your life history is your permanent record. You can't shake it. You may be able to redeem it with great effort, but given my druthers, I would have written my permanent rec-ord with forethought and careful planning, and skipped the would'ufs, could'ufs, and should'ufs. You really can't burn your bridges; they are there even if you change your name and move to a new address. It affects everything you do and hope to become.

Judy admits that she made many poor choices in life that caused personal heartaches and professional setbacks. I think if she could rewind the clock, she'd do things differently. I think she'd think twice about the broad road and give the narrow road serious consideration. I think she'd tell her daughter and the thousands who subscribe to Newsweek, "There's a better way to live, so choose wisely; don't wash away your future with a regret-filled past." It's something I wish all young people could learn so that they could avoid the losses that a careless life produces.

One recent evening I was on an exercise machine at a local health club when two high school girls jumped onto the ma-chines next to me and talked with great passion about boys.

They took one look at my skinny white legs and black socks and thought, "This guy's harmless, so let's talk." I tried to mind my own business and watch the news, but I couldn't help listening. So I removed my earphones and leaned in. I should probably tell people what I do for a living, but if you're going to have a conversation in public, that's the risk you take you could become sermon material.

One of the girls said that her boyfriend had been two-timing her she found him drunk with another girl who was also drunk. I leaned in a little farther. She said, "For two weeks, he was doing this, and what's worse is that none of my friends told me about it. I found out who my..." and then she used a very bad word, "friends were." I noticed that my heart rate was increasing a little.

They moved on to the topic of which college they were thinking about attending in the fall. One was thinking of a smaller private school but was concerned that maybe she wouldn't be able to find enough parties. The other assured her that if that school didn't have enough drinking she could always drift over to parties at the University of Minnesota. I wanted to ask them if their mothers knew about their plans to waste their education on underage drinking and develop a substance abuse habit that could

hamper their lives forever.

The conversation shifted to one girl's older brother, who was dating a new girlfriend, but instead of asking how long they'd been dating or what his girlfriend was like, her friend asked, "Are they living together yet?" It just rolled off her tongue as if living together was the next logical step in some-one's dating life. At that point I looked down at my machine and noticed that my heart rate was racing off the charts. I also noticed that there was a sadness in my heart and genuine compassion. Historically, I have been hard on people like that, quick to judge, written them off as sinners and losers. I'd at least give them a look, a head shake, maybe even comment on how utterly senseless they were-in a loving sort of way. Those girls were in a free fall headed for a bad ending.

But something happened as I cooled down. I credit the Holy Spirit, who prompted me to close my eyes and pray for those two girls who are eternally loved and valued by God. I prayed for a solid four minutes that God would put his hand on their lives, that he would bring Christian friends into their dormitories and classrooms who would share God's love with them. I prayed that God would one day set them free from a path that could only hurt them. That's our job, by the way. Those of us who are Christians are called to pray for and try to reach those who have lost their way. I believe that God answers those kinds of prayers.

The Harder Life

Numerous people have said to me over the years, "But, Bob, trying to live a good, Christian life is just too hard." Whenever I hear someone say that, I have to bite my tongue and measure my words, because I could never be convinced, not in a million years, that trying to live a good, moral, Christian life is harder than living a careless, immoral, undisciplined life. The brokenness, loss, and regret associated with a careless, immoral, undisciplined life is far more difficult than the love, joy, and wholeness produced by a godly life. There's nothing easy about living an undisciplined life. There's nothing easy about suffering through multiple partners, addictions, abuse, bondage, and debt. At first glance, the principled, moral, Christian life might seem difficult and constrictive, and sometimes it is, but I'll tell you what's harder-coming home to a third spouse who can't stand you and kids who don't want to see you, having a boss who won't trust you, and having a bank that wants to foreclose on you all because you were unwilling to follow the ways that God laid out for every human being to follow. I could never be convinced that the good, moral, Christian life is harder than its counterpart. It's not even close. Bill Hybels said it this way, and twenty years ago when I read this in his book *Who You Are* (When No One's Looking), I took out my pen

and, with heavy hand, underlined every word:

There's nothing easy about living an undisciplined life.

Some people seem to succeed at everything they try. They have successful careers; they relate well to their families; they may be involved in church and community activities; they are active, growing Christians-they're even physically fit. When you get close to people like this and try to determine just how they manage to fulfill so much of their potential, you find that in almost every case one quality shows up-discipline.

By contrast, other people have an embarrassing string of setbacks, disasters and failures. If you get close to them, and if they're honest with themselves and you, they'll probably offer you an appraisal of why these calamities have befallen them. "Well, you know, I just started to let things slide," they may say, "I put off doing my homework." "I neglected to follow up leads." "I didn't keep my eye on the store." "I didn't push my chair back from the bar." "I stopped making my calls." "I didn't watch the till." "I didn't take care of myself."

"I didn't spend time with my family." "I thought problems would just solve themselves."⁴

I'm telling you, there's nothing easy about a careless life.

Nothing. In the words of Judy Edelson, "I thought my past didn't mean anything. I thought things left undone, things said in haste, niceties ignored and laws broken weren't important." Judy learned otherwise, and I applaud her for putting it into print for the whole world to see and learn from. And my guess is that some of you reading these words are saying to yourself, "Bob, you're right. The reason my life is one regret after another is because I lack discipline. I lack stick-to-itiveness. I start something and then I quit. I make poor commitments of time and money that bury me. I cut corners that come back to bite me. I get sucked into bad relationships that hurt me. I'm in a free fall with a bad parachute."

The good news is that there's hope and healing for every human being. Second Corinthians 12:9 says that God's "grace is sufficient." God's grace is sufficient to overcome any sin and put us on a new path. God provided a way for us to be healed and set free from our past failures through the forgiveness that comes when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, who paid for every wrong we've committed with his life, death, and resurrection. It's available to every human being, and it's a gift to be received by faith. But once we receive God's forgiveness, he calls us to lead a different life, a more disciplined life.

How do you get discipline? Where does it come from? A lot of it comes from practicing on a daily basis what Scott Peck calls delayed gratification. Do the hard work first so you can enjoy the results later. Do the hard work first so life will be easier later. It's going to school first so you can get a job later. It's working out first so you can enjoy brownies and ice cream later. It's carrying five credits first so you can have a lighter load later. It's the only right way to live. Henry Cloud says there are only two options in life, either hard/easy or easy/hard: hard first, easy later; easy first, hard later. He says that the only right way to live is to choose hard first so you have easy later.

That's what discipline is all about. It's saving money. It's staying home on Friday night to study for an exam. It's working long hours on a project. It's showing up on time. It's getting up at 5:45 every morning to drive students to school on a two-hour bus route so you can pay for your tuition, which is what some of us did for four years while going to college. It's staying sexually pure and delaying that instant gratification for long-term intimacy in marriage. It's having a goal, rolling up your sleeves, and doing what's necessary to achieve it, believing that all the hard work and sacrifice up front will pay off somewhere down the road. Because there's only one way to do this.

Sucked Under at Dimple Rock

A few summers ago, three dads, a mom, and six of our teen-age kids stood near river rafts getting final instructions from a greasy-haired, shirtless, chain-smoking, drifter type about how to navigate the dangerous Youghiogheny River, which cuts through the lower Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania. That year, the East Coast was saturated with steady rains, so the river was high and fast. Even the older kids were wide-eyed as the instructor warned us about two spots: Dimple Rock and the Double Hydraulics rapids. Dimple Rock had warning signs leading up to it, urging rafters to exit the river and transport their rafts around it. In huge red letters the signs read: Warning! Dangerous, Life-threatening Rapids. Exit River Here!

Our pre-trip instructor took a long drag on his cigarette and said, "Ignore the signs, but listen up. Choose a captain right now." Two of the dads, Dave and Tim, were chosen as captains and were told to sit in the back of the rafts, rudder them, and bark out orders. The guy waved his cigarette at the rest of us and said without smiling, "This is a dictatorship. Do what the captain says. If he says paddle right, do it; paddle left, do it." Then he told us that to get through Dimple Rock we had to paddle hard and straight leading into it, then, at the captain's command, take a hard left because the rapids want to thrust you into Dimple Rock, flip your raft, and suck you under. Then he said it again, "This is a dictatorship. Obey your captain and you'll make it." We launched, it was wet and wild, and several people got ejected out of our rafts long before Dimple Rock.

About halfway down the river, some of the teens in our raft began to resent our captain, Dave, who took his job very seriously and who, in their opinion, took great delight in boss-ing us around. They rolled their eyes whenever he demanded, "Remember, this is a dictatorship. You have to do what I say." I heard rumblings of revolt and mutiny, but I'll tell you what, when we came to Dimple Rock, we flew through it like pros. In fact, the kids said, "Was that it?" They were disappointed that it wasn't more eventful. I said, "Believe me, you don't want it to be more eventful. People have died here."

Two days later we were sitting in the Pittsburgh airport waiting for our flight home. I picked up a copy of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, and on the front page I saw the story of a man who had drowned at Dimple Rock the day after we were there. "Andrew Dearden, 46, died Saturday after his raft flipped at Dimple Rock," it reported. "It creates turbulent water that quickly flips a boat and traps a person below the surface, making rescues difficult." I sat there reading in sober silence. "It'll take you down real quick," an expert said of the river. "All five rafters were flipped into the raging surf, four of them surfaced, but Dearden was in trouble and never made it out."

"There's only one way to do this," Joe the skydiver insisted. "This is a dictatorship. Obey your captain," the rafting in-structor demanded. We don't like those kinds of words. They feel confining and boring. So we roll our eyes and feel like pushing the captain off the backside of the raft.

But I've learned to respect those words words like that can keep you alive. And words from our heavenly Captain can keep us alive too: "Enter through the narrow gate," he urged his listeners. "For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus points us to the narrow road because he loves us, because that road leads to life. Be among the few who get on the narrow road, because remember, *there's only one way to do this*.